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Last week I wrote about the new phone applications that allow dissemination of personal video streaming – Periscope and Meerkat. They were widely used during the Mayweather-Pacquiao fight to allow hundreds of thousands of viewers to bypass a \$100 pay-per-view cable bill and watch for free – some 10,000 at one point watching a single feed.

It all pointed up a larger trend that I think is going to profoundly affect cable television – younger viewers cutting the cable (known in industry lexicon as "Cord-Cutters") or never hooking it up in the first place ("Cord-Nevers"). And subsequent ramifications for sports leagues and television networks who've grown fat from the cable model.

Well, just on Monday, a well-known trade publication published new figures indicating just how startling that trend is taking hold. According to Multichannel.com, pay TV (that is, cable providers such as Comcast and Verizon FiOS and satellite providers such as Dish Network and DirecTV) suffered a loss of 31,000 customers compared with a gain of 271,000 customers for the same period last year. The big dive was taken by Dish but cable didn't exactly compensate.

That's an alarming quarter-to-quarter trend for the people who've jacked up your cable or dish service bill for years in return for hundreds of channels you likely never watch, not to mention an often-negative customer-service experience.

Where are those customers going? Most are hardly abstaining from television. They're just watching it in new and less costly ways.

My question is about the category of viewers of which I've been a part for 42 years, the one for which the industry doesn't have a catchy jargon label: I'd call us Cord- Foreverers. Can we finally be so disdainful and disgusted with cable companies that we would make the switch to something completely different and much less costly at the expense of convenience?

The operative phrase is "Over-The-Top." That means any number of methods in which viewers make an end run around cable to get only what they want at considerably less expense.

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Some are getting digital signals through over-the-air antennas and what are called ATSC receivers. Some are augmenting that with a small cache of about 20 channels they really want cobbled together on their own or through services such as Sling TV. And whatever gaps in home viewing that are left over, they watch by going to the bars. That often includes regional sports networks such as Comcast SportsNet or MASN that commonly are not available on such platforms because of cost and segmented audiences.

And some will doubtless turn to burgeoning apps such as Periscope (owned by Twitter) and Meerkat to pirate signals of whatever is available for free.

The most interesting alternative is Sling TV, an independent service owned by Dish Network that launched in February. It offers 20 channels most viewers consider essential, delivered to your TV, laptop or mobile device over the Internet for a radically lower cost than cable – about \$20 per month. It is aimed directly at those Millennials and young adults I spoke of previously, also known as "Cord Nevers" because they never hooked up cable in the first place and don't intend to.

It's definitely a minimalist alternative. You can't watch more than one program on different devices at the same time. There is no DVR capability. You can't rewind streams. You can't get some niche news channels you may want. And you won't be getting those regional sports networks to watch, say, the Orioles or Phillies, because they charge too much to make them viable for Sling TV.

Still, for those on a strict budget or looking to reduce unnecessary household costs, something like Sling TV is a viable option. And the basic package includes a cross-section of just about everything the average household really wants that can't be watched over the air – including ESPN, ESPN2, TBS, TNT, Food Network, CNN, ABC Family, HGTV, History and Lifetime. There are kids, sports, world news, Hollywood and lifestyle tiers for extra.

But what about those in the middle to upper-middle class who've become accustomed to the convenience of cable and have been grudgingly willing to pay the cost?

For them, the pressure applied by those live-streaming apps and Sling TV might finally be enough for the big cable companies to concede to something they've been dragging their feet on for years – a la carte cable. That means being able to choose exactly the channels from your traditional cable supplier that you want for a reduced cost, rather than being forced to pay for dozens of channels you never watch.

If the Pay TV subscription numbers continue the most recent trend downward, that's an option that could finally materialize. It might be the only way cable can stay afloat and beat back the pirates. – David Jones, *Pennlive*



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