

## Cutting the Cord (Firing your cable TV provider) By Steven R. Smith

I am telling you my own observations and experiences in climbing out from beneath the burden of excess cable bills and cutting the cord so I can escape their weight.

I cut the cord, at least down to the internet. So far, I have been using my “Smart TV's” Live TV and streaming features, which brings in about 300 free channels, as well as paid subscriptions for a wide range of prices. There are Free channels such as TUBI and Pluto that bring in much more in the way of movies and TV programming. Right away I discovered I had a lot to learn about streaming. Upon cancelling Xfinity, I bought a \$10.00 subscription to Discovery Plus thinking I could watch ALL of the programs and seasons found on cable's Discovery Channel sans commercials. That is NOT exactly accurate. It depends on the structure of a program's license. I also have streaming subscriptions to Netflix, Apple and Amazon Prime. I have since cancelled the Discovery Plus subscription now that I have a streaming source for a host of programs, albeit paid. More and that later.

I was paying \$340.00 per month for Cable TV, the internet, my home phone and security system. I went back and forth with XFINITY (Comcast) at least 4 times. Here's a tip: It is best to call before 3 PM PST to talk to a local service rep or a live-body regional tech. Otherwise, your call might get kicked over to a representative overseas. We have all talked to them (or tried to). They are difficult to understand and read from a script. If you ask a question they may have to start reading their script again from the beginning. The same goes for their managers - should you ask for one. Comcast offered to cut my price by half if I stayed. I told them I had asked for a price reduction two years ago when the price jumped into another dimension and they had refused. I then asked the service rep how long the low price would be guaranteed and was told 60 to 90 days. Then it would shoot back up. “No thank you.” Then they told me to sit on the offer for a couple of days and call back. I did and they made the same introductory price offer. The only thing they would guarantee to not increase was the price of the internet. With my security system (which I owned) I was paying \$130.00 plus fees. I opted to CUT EVERYTHING. My alarm system still works without them. I looked into other alarm companies as well. Like the cable companies they have boosted their prices, and they have the same “introductory” tactics. You can go to Costco and buy a multi camera system and get a sound detection device so that in the event a thief breaks a window, and the window sensors are not activated the sound detector will still trigger an alarm. But Alarms are not what I am writing about.

From streaming and other subscription services you are still going to need the internet and a wi-fi modem. As it was, I went to a cable competitor for a better price on the internet - \$65.00 plus \$10.00 for their modem – not an introductory Willy, Cheatham and Howell price. There are internet prices that are cheaper if you want to go through your mobile phone

service (I saw T-Mobile offering 5G Internet for \$25.00 per month). As for the internet, I also got to keep my home phone. I have to maintain a “home phone” for my private investigation license. Mind you, I am no Magnum PI. I use the internet to find people. These days anyone can.

**Get an Antenna:** If you only want to watch Live TV for the three primary networks, and other local channels broadcast over the airwaves you will need some kind of antenna and a built-in tuner which most TVs are equipped with. They come in all shapes, sizes and configurations from picture size indoor antennas that fit in the window to the exterior ones running on a pole alongside the house or on a shorter pole attached to the side of the roof at peak height. If you Google antenna you will see that some are quite unsightly.

Regarding aerial antennas: According to <https://www.rabbitears.info> the ideal height for an aerial antenna is 13 feet. The user can go to the website, enter their location, search “Current Stations” and rabbitears.info will provide an entire list of stations within your aerial antenna’s range. It is approximately 60 miles. The best reception for Summerset communities comes out of Sacramento. There are approximately 78 VHF & UHF channels throughout the entire Bay Area. Because Mt Diablo does not have a VHF antenna the San Francisco and San Jose stations are harder to get. You either need a taller antenna with a signal amplifier pointed at Sutro Tower or subscribe to a streaming service like YouTube TV or Hulu that offers them.

Presently, I have a flimsy antenna that looks like a 9-1/2 x 13-inch picture with a 10-foot coaxial cable attached that connects to the TV’s coaxial input.” That small antenna is better for UHF signals than VHF, which most of the local TV stations broadcast on. I have mine literally pointed Northeast so I can pick up the extremely tall directional antennas in Walnut Grove between Highway 160 and I-5. It enables me to get all three networks, but the signal is not so great. I receive about 58 live TV channels.

For good signal, aerial is the way to go. CC&R limits the size to 1 meter in length. That is pretty much what is available. They attach to the wooden roof structure at peak roof height if necessary for your line of sight. When buying an antenna be it on Amazon, Best Buy WalMart or eBay I recommend you first check out the <https://www.ChannelMaster.com> website. Channel Master can provide you with station channel guides. They also offer a wide range of antenna’s from the flimsy indoor antenna to a fully masted monstrosity. The price range is \$49 to \$279. In case you are wondering, the monstrosity antenna does not meet the SSII Architectural Committee criteria. The pole is at least 30 feet high, and the mast is about 8 feet across. Their most popular model is the “Pro Model UHF/VHF TV Antenna” @ \$149.00. For optimum signal – but not always necessary – you can purchase their preamp for \$79.00. The mast (that space-age thing that captures the signal) is within the 1-meter limit. Channel Master is highly reputable. I personally know people who went that route. They are happy

with the cannels they bring in. Some of the antennas found on Channel Master may also be found on Amazon. Do your research and determine what will be your best option. If you want to find the best line of sight from your antenna to a broadcast tower there are several apps to choose from. Enter your location and like a compass it will point you toward the broadcast tower.

To be better informed about multiple antenna brands and types, you will find plenty of YouTube videos. The more popular ones are put out by “The Antenna Guy.” He goes over antenna pros and cons using easy-to-understand terminology. RCA, Winegard, Antennas Direct, and Televis are some of the other antenna brands The Antenna Guy recommends.

My little 9-1/2x13 inch antenna was picking up mostly UHF channels. To bring in a VHF signal I raised it up by two feet in my window. Luckily I have a hedge that hides it from my neighbor’s kitchen window. The VHF signal is weaker due to my inferior set up.

If using a Smart TV make sure the firmware is up to date – I have mine set to check and install updates automatically. Because of our CC&Rs there are size and height limitations. A tech friend has one of the 1950s looking ray-gun antennas that attach to the non-street side of his chimney at the peak of the roof. It comes with 30 feet of coaxial cable and a small, powered signal amplifier. He gets much clearer reception than his old window antenna. But he still needs that line-of-site to a tower.

### **Antennas to Avoid:**

Most of them have to do with marketing gimmicks/claims. And they are sold on Amazon & Walmart and a lot of other places. The ad refers to them as being HD or Digital antennas. There is no such thing. It either is or isn’t an antenna that receives electromagnetic waves. High Definition or Digital depends on what is put out by the stations. Some antennas claim to receive Ultra 8K. I have only seen a couple of consumer model TVs rated at 6K. Most TVs are 4K (technically 3.65 K). Many new TV series, including House of Dragon, are shot in 6K but only broadcast in 4K. When everything eventually goes to 6K we will need a new 6K DVD player, as well as a 6K TV to get that crisp video and spatial audio.

*Omni Directional* antennas are great for recreational travel. But they are not so great for in the home. You want a precise line of sight for the best signal.

Avoid “*Live Wave*” antennas. They plug into an electrical wall socket with the output being coaxial that then plugs into the TV. In theory it works off your home’s entire grounding system. Keep in mind grounding is used to divert any excess current or take on any static electricity from any one of your household appliances. It is a live wire. If an appliance were to arc or lightning strikes the house, the electricity would carry through the ground circuit. Some

outlets are wired incorrectly with the ground being wired to “neutral.” In that case you risk a house fire.

Avoid antennas being sold by the hard sale company, Clear TV. The antenna’s they push need to be extremely close to a broadcast tower to be effective. You might as well pack up and move within a mile of the broadcast tower to pick up a watchable signal. And then there are videos for do it yourself antennas. Some are time consuming with a couple of the ‘out there” videos leaving me worried about igniting a house fire or electrocution.

Beware of ultra long-range antennas where the seller claims their in-home antenna has a 2900-mile range. In the house there are line-of-sight issues. Try 60 miles at most. With a preamp signal booster, you might reach 100 miles.

Enough on antennas.

**Remote Control:** All content for cutting the cord is dependent on how good your TV’s remote-control features are. Mine does not have fast forward and rewind visible. I had to watch a 20-minute YouTube video to figure out how to exit a program and get back to the Home page so I could watch a cake baking program. I also discovered pushing the play button freezes the image, then while on screen you can do things such as fast forward and rewind, and turn close caption on or off. That information wasn’t in the online manual. My universal remote works with my video receiver and TV. However, once I am streaming a program I have to use my LG Smart TV remote. I am still looking for a better solution.

**Live TV & Streaming** combined provides a satisfying selection of programming including lots of rerun shows from the sixties. Some schedules are a bit confusing – at first. For the local channels out of Sacramento you can get a more extensive schedule online. Each of the local network channels offers their own subchannels. Over the streaming channels you may find groups of Sports, News, Games shows. It depends how your TV is set up. LG has LG-TV which enables you to go to their app store and bring in various streaming services such Hulu, Netflix, MAX, Amazon, Philo, YouTube TV to name but a few. One of the free streaming channels - Tubi has more content including movies and TV programming than Netflix. Philo is reasonably priced @ \$28.00 per month. It carries a lot of channels such as History, Discovery, Comedy Central, that you had on Cable. LiveTV provides an app store so that you can add individual premium channels – for a price. You can buy bundle packages via your computer such as Disney +, Hulu and MAX at a reasonable \$16.99 to \$29.99 per month. The low price comes with commercials. The high-end price is without. Some people prefer to do the 30-day trial version, binge-watch their favorite programs, then cancel the service.

In lieu of an antenna, third-party interfaces such as ROKU, YouTube TV, HULU have their plus and minuses. To get them commercial free you will pay between 85 & 100 bucks per month.

If you want some premium channels or sports packages you must pay additional subscription fees. With all said and done you might end up paying close to your former cable hookup price.

And should you want to record shows, YouTube TV provides unlimited recordings of the programs they offer. There are also third-party recorders that will work. They have their own SmartTV capabilities built in as well as a Live TV antenna input. They can record via antenna or over the internet. For now, you can still bypass most commercials unless they are encrypted so you cannot fast forward. Commercial encryption is coming.

My problem with streaming is the way sports are gravitating to the paid services. An Amazon Prime subscription runs \$136.00 per year, and they still make you watch commercials. Amazon is showing some NFL games as well. But they are also broadcast on regular TV. At least for now.

Explanations of subscription and Devices

**TUBI** is a FREE streaming app that either comes with most Smart TV or can be downloaded from the TV's app store. Supposedly its library is more extensive than that of Netflix. I am binging on old TV programs such as Dark Shadows. Tubi carries some of the Fox programs. A few of the shows that previously aired on network TV (censored) are uncensored on Tubi. It also offers movies for commercial free.

**YouTube:** (bear with me on this one)

You Tube offers a full array of plans from just watching videos to full cable-like programming with YouTube TV (later discussion).

*Plan 1:* Is \$7.99 per month. You get videos of endless topics, and music videos. Some of the videos are full-length films (Earth VS the Giant Spider) at 720 dpi (**d**igital **p**ixels per **i**inch) or lower. Others are shown in HD or 1920x1080i (1920 dpi is horizontal with 1080 being vertical, and the "i" after 1080 indicates the interlacing scan rate). Take a breath.

The full-length YouTube films are not to be confused with their YouTube-TV packages. For your 8 bucks, YouTube videos are supposed to be commercial free. But some full-length videos or sports programs have regular TV ads because they are from an actual network.

*Plan 2:* Same as plan 1 except you get Ad-free full music videos. Better yet, you can download *all* videos and watch them offline or play music in the background.

There are individual plans at \$13.99 per month and family plans for \$26.99. The latter enables several family members to watch ad free videos and save them offline.

**YouTube-TV. The Base Plan** starts at \$59.99 for two months (in some promotions three months). It depends on what mood they are in. After 2 (or is it 3?) the monthly price goes up to \$82.99. That almost sounds like cable prices – uh, not quite. The YouTube TV base plan includes over 100 Live Channels, covering a wide range of entertainment, news, and sports programming and your local TV stations and networks.

Here's a more detailed Base Plan breakdown I borrowed from the YouTubeTV website <https://tv.youtube.com>

- **Major Broadcast Networks:** ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, and PBS.
- **News Networks:** CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CNBC, BBC News, and others.
- **Entertainment Channels:** AMC, FX, TNT, Comedy Central, Freeform, E!, and Syfy.
- **Sports Channels:** ESPN, FS1, Golf Channel, and NBA TV.
- **Family Channels:** Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network.
- **Other Notable Channels:** HGTV, TBS, USA, and many more.

Important Considerations:

- Some channels, particularly sports channels like NBA TV and NFL Network, may require separate subscriptions in certain regions.
- Regional variations may affect the availability of local channels and certain regional sports networks.
- YouTube TV offers add-on packages for Spanish channels and premium networks like HBO Max and SHOWTIME.

*Okay, back to reality.* Are you confused yet? If so, that is what your local cable company is hoping, so that you will be begging them to take you back with a revised intro-package.

If you have a 4K TV and want to watch YouTube TV, you will need to pay an extra \$19.99 per month. Add-ons such as Paramount plus with Showtime come in at \$11.99. I stopped counting YouTube TV add-ons after fifteen.

**Hulu, Disney+ and MAX** (soon to revert back to HBO MAX) can be found starting at \$16.99 with commercials or \$29.99 for all three without. Look closely at the channels offered. Hulu does not include the History Channel. And like YouTube, there are plenty of add-ons – for a price. Hulu otherwise will provide you with a lot of the cable-like channel packages except you are “streaming” them.

**ROKU:** A streaming device that can be bought on Amazon, Walmart or Best Buy for under \$30.00. It enables a user to stream movies, programs and interconnect (for a fee) to other services from *Netflix* (most popular) for movies and original series at \$7.99 per month w/ads or \$17.99 w/o ads. It also offers *Spotify* for music and podcasts. A lot of the programs and applications are free. But “free” translates into having ads. Other apps include *Paramount +* \$8.00 per month with ads, \$13.99 w/o; *Amazon Prime* \$139 per year with ads, add \$3.00 per month w/o ads; *Apple TV* (\$10.00 per month); *PEACOCK* free w/ads, premium \$14.00 per month or \$140.00 per year. Peacock shows original content and occasionally will offer movies that are in theaters, as well NBC programs, sporting events.

Roku also offers large screen TVs with ROKU built into it.

**FIRESTICK:** Amazon Device that enables you to download content much like ROKU does. You can download content from all over the world. Internationally you can find MAX and the others for free – make sure they are in the language you prefer. I found HBO MAX in French. Disclaimer: getting Premium channels for free is violating the owners copyright. People resort to using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to avoid paying fees. Amazon is aware of many of the dark side VPNs and tries to block people from using them.

#### **WIRELESS Wi-Fi Internet Connection:**

Works like a cellphone, except it finds the nearest cellphone tower connected to the internet. T-Mobile offers internet connection via 5G wi-fi. With them you use your cellphone to locate the T-Mobile tower for internet service at a cost of \$25.00 per month.

**MUAMA RYOKO** offers the same thing, with monthly prices starting at around \$15,00 for 3 GB and \$40.00 for 10 GB. The user must first purchase a device with its own SMS card – just like a cell phone. It is best used by people who work remotely or people who are traveling. Reviews are mixed, and Consumer Reports has not yet reviewed this product. Complaints range from poor tech support to the device not working at all. There is a thirty-day return policy, and you must return it in the original box. Being one fearful of having to return things, my garage is stacked with original boxes from old speakers to Robby the Robot.

**Superbox:** There are two versions – Pro (\$329.00 32 GB of storage, Max ( \$359.00 64 GB of storage). As of this writing, Amazon is selling them for \$100.00 off. The initial reviews are quite good (five stars). The downside is, unless you have technical know-how and understand how to close off ports your network may be open, even with a VPN. Superbox is legal to buy but again deals with owner’s rights. While the creator of the device may be libel for being the one getting the content to the user, the user can also be libel by knowing they are streaming content that bypassed paying the show owners for the content as well as federal tax that would be added on for each premium channel. Ignorance is not an excuse.

**IPTV** – requires a special box *that is legal to buy* but questionable on use, as it also violate owner content rights, and avoids federal tax fees. It's kind of like having the cable guy turning you on to someone who makes the box that pulls channels in from all over the world, including premium ones off the internet. Then think of copyright infringement (felony). I have not heard of HBO police showing up at anyone's home. But they did spike my best friends signal when his box was connected to cable and rendered it useless.

### **Conclusion and Recap:**

The object is to “cut the cord and save as much money as possible.

Research. Research. Research. I hate researching via the internet. I often get sidetracked when a new link is referenced and I check it out. I would rather read the phonebook, looking for odd last names than researching via the internet. The key to search engines is knowing the right question and how to ask it.

What device/services do I need to invest in? You are going to need a good internet connection. I switched to fiber-optic for more stability in download/upload. You will need some sort of wi-fi modem. I pay \$65.00 per month for the internet and modem. I also purchased a low-grade antenna to bring in network TV stations – out of Sacramento. But I am upgrading to an aerial model. Where to hang it is the question.

What channels and services do you want? Understand the capability of your smart TV.

What applications will fit my needs? If you want current movies there are various subscription programs. Some are pricey.

Understand your TV's remote control. A lot of the buttons can be used for additional functions. I had to watch half a dozen YouTube videos to figure it out. Each brand's remote is different. Do not buy a third party remote unless it is “fully” compatible with your setup.

Expect a sharp learning curve to get you headed in the right direction. Breaking old TV habits will get you through it. Luckily, I have a soft couch because, more than once I have thrown my remote onto it in frustration. Changing decades-old habits is not easy. But that frustration goes away when I think about the two hundred plus dollars I am saving by cutting the cord and that after I have paid for Netflix, Philo, Amazon and Apple TV.