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Tahlia Hein moved to New York City on a tight budget and without a TV. When she and her roommates finally got one, chipping in for cable on top of a \$50 utilities bill per roommate just wasn't feasible. So she opted instead to subscribe to TV streaming services like Netflix and Sling TV.

The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual. ~ Vince Lombardi

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Cutting the cord, she said, "was very liberating."

Forgoing cable and satellite TV is a decision that's increasingly common — 1 in 7 Americans is a cord cutter and an additional 9% have never had a cable or satellite TV subscription, according to the Pew Research Center. In the first three months of the year, cable and satellite services lost about 762,000 subscribers, about five times as many as the same period last year, according to research firm MoffettNathanson.

With the average monthly price of cable or satellite TV hovering around \$100 in the U.S., cutting the cord can save consumers hundreds of dollars each year.

That is, until they start

subscribing to streaming alternatives.

Cord cutting has been heralded as a consumer-friendly revolution that lets audiences pay only for the content they enjoy. But as the market becomes more crowded and competitive, it's uncertain whether digital-only services will necessarily prove less expensive than the cable and satellite services they're quickly supplanting.

That much is clear already to customers who rely on multiple streaming services, such as Hein, who wound up subscribing to Sling TV, Netflix, CBS All Access and Amazon Prime.

"Sling is how I've been getting my cable jones for about a year now," she said. "But it was also a hefty subscription to hang on to."

use of N-word
on his show
'inexcusable'

Her predicament isn't unique, according to Ian Olgeirson, an analyst with the Kagan division of S&P Global Market Intelligence.

"We've seen consumers complain about spending but at the same time have ramped up their spending," he said.

With more than 130 streaming services (also referred to as over-the-top services), a hodgepodge of sticks and boxes such as the Roku streaming stick and Google's Chromecast for viewing on television sets, and cloud DVRs, there's no shortage of products tailored to a la carte viewing.

Video-on-demand staples such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have thousands of movies and television shows available at any time, as well as original shows. At just a few dollars a month, they helped drive many to digital alternatives and continue to attract both cord cutters and pay-TV subscribers alike.

Higher-cost offerings such as Sling TV, PlayStation Vue, DirecTV Now and the recently announced Hulu With Live TV are growing in popularity. With base rates around \$20 to \$40 a month, they aim to replicate the live-TV viewing experience with dozens of channels in real time.

Until recently, live sports programming was nearly impossible to watch without a cable-TV subscription. But now sports fans can get their fix through add-on packages via Sling TV, for \$45 a month, and fuboTV, which starts at \$14.99 a month.

In addition, there are numerous niche services like Crunchyroll, an anime streaming service, for \$6.95 a month; Acorn TV, dedicated to British content, for \$4.99 a month; and Curiosity Stream, a documentary platform, for \$2.99 a month.

Individually, these services are far less expensive than cable-TV packages. But for viewers whose favorite programs aren't covered by a single streaming provider, the costs can quickly mount.

"You're going to see consumers who look at those packages and realize a smaller package is going to ultimately not hit all buttons they want to hit," Olgeirson said. "We're entering a phase of more choice but not one in which consumers have ultimate leverage."

Ultimate leverage would allow customers to pay for just the programs they like: say NFL Football, "House of Cards," local news programming and Nickelodeon. But for now, that could require purchasing an antenna and subscriptions to DirecTV Now, Netflix and PlayStation Vue.

That's because of what telecommunications analyst Craig Moffett calls the value chain. Studios make shows, which are bundled to networks, which are bundled to media conglomerates, which are bundled into a broad package from a cable or satellite provider.

"When people talk about unbundling ... they mean unbundling individual networks from each other," Moffett said. "Customers find it frustrating that selecting individual networks is not one of their options."

And on top of subscription costs, there's that pesky Internet bill.

According to analyst Bruce Leichtman at Leichtman Research Group, in 2016 the average cost for pay-TV service nationwide, including plans bundled to broadband and sold on their own, was \$103 per month. And according to Kagan, the price of Internet access only, without pay TV, was \$52.29 per month in the first quarter of 2017.

So hypothetically, if a cord cutter pays the average rate for an Internet-only package and subscribes to Hulu's live-TV service (\$39.99 per month) and YouTube Red (\$9.99 per month), they'll pay \$102.27 — saving 73 cents per month compared with the average pay-TV bundle. Throw in Amazon Prime Video (\$8.99 per month) or any streaming sports service and cord cutting becomes the costlier alternative.

Questions of cost aside, the cord-cutting trend is only likely to accelerate. Emarketer estimates that cord cutters and cord nevers (people who have never subscribed to pay TV) will grow from 51 million in 2017 to more than 66 million by 2020.

Don't count Hein among that number. After seeing her combined Internet and streaming bills climb to about \$112, the 31-year-old, who works in digital media, made a call to a cable company, which offered an Internet and cable bundle that was \$20 more per month than what she was paying as a cord cutter. The cost was greater, but so was the convenience: No longer would she have to futz with different apps to find her favorite shows.

On a recent Friday, she began the transition back to cable.

That said, she's not ruling out subscribing to streaming services. Hein said she'd happily shell out for a channel dedicated exclusively to the "Law & Order" franchise.

"I can't believe we aren't there yet," she said. "I would pay real money to subscribe to that." – **Los Angeles Times**

