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This year, Michael Gartenberg, a former technology analyst, took the brave step of canceling his cable subscription. After six months of tinkering with alternatives, he went running back.

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Mr. Gartenberg had subscribed to PlayStation Vue, Sony's online video service that offers a slimmer bundle of TV channels than a traditional cable subscription and for about half the price. Yet he kept running into problems: Many of his favorite channels were missing, like CW and CBS. And after a power failure in his home, he got locked out of his Vue account because his internet address was reset and Sony thought he had switched locations.

Mr. Gartenberg eventually wondered whether Vue was worth the money he was saving. "At that point, there had to be better alternatives than this, and it turned out there was," he said. "It was cable."

Mr. Gartenberg's return to cable is antithetical to the accelerating growth of so-called cord-cutters, the people who have parted ways with cable in favor of streaming video services like Netflix and Hulu. Last year, there were 4.9 million cord-cutters in the United States, up 11 percent from the year before, according to the research firm eMarketer. The number of cord-cutting options is also proliferating, with more content providers like HBO, Showtime and Nickelodeon offering apps for streaming their content without a cable account.

Yet the overwhelming majority of Americans — about 100 million homes — still cling to cable.

What could be getting in the way of cutting the cord? To assess this, I tried Sony's Vue and Dish Network's similar streaming service, Sling TV, which also offers a slimmer

**on Pa. budget:
'I will sign this
revenue
package'**

bundle of TV channels than traditional cable. I decided to compare the two TV bundles rather than stand-alone apps like HBO Go, Netflix and Hulu, because Vue and Sling TV were designed to replace traditional cable packages.

After testing the two for a week, I had an answer: Neither streaming service felt like an adequate substitute for a cable package, largely because of content restrictions, broadcast delays and the difficulty of using a game controller with one of the services. What do Sony's Vue and Sling TV actually offer? Vue's starter bundle has more than 55 channels, including ESPN, NBC and Disney, for \$30 a month. The higher-tier bundles have 70 channels a month for \$35 a month and 100 channels for \$45 a month.

Sling TV's base bundle of about 25 channels, which includes ESPN, AMC and CNN, starts at \$20 a month. From there, you can add mini bundles, like an extra \$5 a month for a group of sports channels, or an additional \$5 a month for a children's bundle including Disney Junior and Nick Toons.

Users should be aware that Vue was designed primarily for Sony's PlayStation 4, which costs about \$350. That means the default setup is to use a game controller with the service, though Sony also offers a universal PlayStation 4 remote control that works with Vue for about \$30. Sony also offers Vue apps for iPhones, iPads and Android devices, as well as the Roku, Chromecast and Amazon Fire streaming gadgets.

Sling TV works on more devices, including iPhones, iPads and Android devices, plus Apple TV, the Amazon Fire, Roku, Chromecast and the Microsoft Xbox, among others. Another difference is that Vue includes DVR, or the ability to record programs to watch later. You can tag your favorite shows and watch episodes for up to 28 days. Sling TV lacks this ability.

For longtime cable subscribers, the limitations on content on Vue and Sling TV may be the toughest to digest. The snags include delays in live broadcasts, the inability to fast-forward through some content, and some missing important channels. With Sling TV, there were long delays when watching live sports. When streaming the Wimbledon tournament, for example, tennis matches were at least 30 seconds behind the live broadcast of the same match on a cable box. This defeats the purpose of watching live sports — the scores I saw on the screen were behind the scores shown on cable TV or those popping up on Twitter.

Sling TV said a number of factors caused broadcast delays, including the internet connection, type of content and channel. By contrast, there was no noticeable delay when watching live sports on Vue. Both services also offer some programs for on-demand viewing, or the ability to watch them whenever you want — yet for many shows on both services, the services were forbidden to fast-forward through on-demand content. Sony and Sling said the inability to skip through some recorded content was because of agreements with content partners — in other words, they want you to watch the commercials. The old-school setup of a cable box with TiVo is still more convenient.

There are other restrictions, like some major channels missing from both bundles. Sling TV lacks CBS, CW and Discovery, among others. PlayStation Vue also lacks major channels including CW, BBC America and A&E.

Another limitation on Vue is that your PlayStation needs to stay put — meaning if you activated Vue in your house and then took the PlayStation to your family member's house, you could not log in to Vue. Sony said that network providers designed this restriction to limit TV viewing to your home.

Watching TV on a big screen is a group experience, so it's important to be able to hand the remote control to others to let them channel surf. So I invited my neighbors over and asked them to do something simple with Vue and Sling TV: Find something they wanted to watch. They accomplished the tasks fairly quickly on both services, though they

struggled with the PlayStation game controller.

One neighbor, who works for a utility company, took about three minutes to figure out how to use the PlayStation controller to load the TV guide and pick something to watch. His wife, a scientist, took about a minute. A third neighbor, a museum worker, fumbled with the controller for about four minutes before finding an episode of "Scandal." They all found the universal remote control, which Sony sells separately, much more intuitive. By contrast, the test subjects all immediately knew how to use Sling TV to pick TV shows or sports events they wanted to watch, using a Roku TV remote, largely because its interface was more streamlined than the Vue's.

It's tough to recommend either Vue or Sling TV as replacements for a majority of cable subscribers. Technologically, both Vue and Sling TV have better-designed software than a traditional cable box from Comcast, Time Warner or Charter. But because there are some missing major channels and annoying restrictions on how content can be watched, most consumers are better off sticking with cable.

Sports fans may enjoy getting access to ESPN and other sports channels on either Vue or Sling TV for less than the cost of a traditional cable subscription. But the broadcast delay on Sling TV is a deal breaker. And if you don't regularly play video games, buying a PlayStation 4 just for watching sports is costly and impractical. (The Vue apps made for cheaper streaming devices, like Roku and Fire TV, aren't as powerful as the PlayStation app.)

Roger Lynch, the chief executive of Sling TV, said the service gave people the flexibility to subscribe to bundles based on their preferences. "Everyone has their own reasons for becoming a Sling subscriber," he said in an interview. Eric Lempel, a marketing executive for Sony, said, "We wanted to give you all the channels that you want," without the need to pay for hundreds of unnecessary channels. For a small set of cable subscribers, both Vue and Sling TV will have all the channels they want, but they will also include unwanted channels, too.

In a perfect world, consumers could pick each channel they want and pay for it, à la carte. But the content providers still hold the cards, and there is no easy way to do that quite yet. — *New York Times*

As federal regulators hammer away at a plan to give consumers more choice in their cable boxes, lawmakers and even some of the Federal Communications Commission's own senior officials say one big issue will need to be addressed before the agency can pass any new rules weakening the cable industry's grip over the set-top box.

That issue, which cable and content companies have flagged as an objection before the FCC, has to do with the protection of copyright. That may sound boring, but it's what greases the wheels for billions of dollars in TV programming and economic activity every year, and it ultimately shapes what you get to see on your screen. But it's not just the cable companies that say the FCC's plan jeopardizes copyright. The nation's top copyright officials, too, have taken issue with it.

"My office has met with the Copyright Office, and I know that the Copyright Office has expressed concern about just what you described," Democratic FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel **told** House lawmakers Tuesday. "So I think more work is necessary on our part." Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) said Tuesday that she's heard from the Copyright Office, too, on the same issue. Another Democrat on the commission, Mignon Clyburn, said copyright protections "must be in place" in any final rule, but stopped short of saying the FCC's initial plan had problems. But what, exactly, is the issue they're talking about?

Well, let's start with the FCC's proposal. The agency basically wants to decouple your cable TV content from the box you currently rent from your cable company for a monthly

fee. In theory, that would mean any other company could take that content, repackage it, and put it in their own box — and then sell that box on the open market. This could potentially lead to more competition in an industry that's currently dominated by cable firms, which make hundreds of dollars a year from the average household from box rentals.

Cable industry critics of this proposal say it would open the door to tech companies inserting ads on top of the content they've taken from cable companies, thereby profiting from programming they technically didn't secure the rights to themselves. And, they say, it would effectively remove the anti-piracy protections built into today's cable boxes that keep thieves from making and distributing illegal copies of shows and movies. "The proposed approach would circumvent the [cable company's] technological protection measures and license restrictions, with no enforceable means to prevent streaming that movie outside the home, in clear violation of the license to the [cable company], and the content owner's copyright," industry officials argued last month in a [regulatory filing](#).

The FCC's chairman, Tom Wheeler, [has said](#) advances in technology have made it easier to ensure that copyright is protected while still making life easier for consumers. But Wheeler also conceded Tuesday that he would work with the Copyright Office and others to make sure the final plan addresses those issues. ([This cable industry proposal would let you ditch your cable box forever](#))

Some copyright lawyers who support the FCC's plan [say the cable industry is simply "dressing"](#) anticompetitive practices "in the rhetoric of copyright law," and that there's really no problem to speak of here. "It's hard as an initial matter to see what the Copyright Office could say" against the FCC plan, added John Bergmayer, a senior staff attorney at the consumer group Public Knowledge, "since giving users choice of what devices they use to access their [cable] subscriptions does not implicate any of the exclusive rights under the Copyright Act."

Still, the critiques from Republicans and Democrats, including from some of Wheeler's own Democratic colleagues on the commission, suggest the FCC plan may have to change if it is ultimately to pass, meaning the result could shift closer to the cable industry's position. Cable officials have offered a counterproposal to the FCC plan, saying it allows consumers to get rid of their cable boxes while preserving copyright protections. The counteroffer would turn the set-top box into an app embedded in new smart TVs that can determine which content tier a cable customer has paid to see. And it would be adopted by all cable companies with more than 1 million subscribers. (It's worth noting here that Wheeler's plan, by comparison, would allow companies to design their own box-replacing apps, too.)

Wheeler has said he found the industry idea "heartening," but on Tuesday he took a shot at it, saying it was little more than a bit of calculated PR. "One page is not a proposal," he said, "it's a press release." — [Wall Street Journal](#); [more from Fierce Cable](#)

State legislative leaders met behind closed doors this week in their quest to find new taxes to sock you with to pay for the illegal budget they passed — and an illegal budget that Gov. Wolf allowed to become law without his signature — but one that did not have the public money to fully fund it. And we find that "behind closed doors" part particularly obnoxious. The people's business deserves full transparency. Which means everything should be discussed and debated in open session. "Behind closed doors" breeds one thing and one thing only — corruption. — [Pittsburgh Tribune-Review](#)



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