

Cancelling Your Cable: Are You Ready?

Assessing the alternatives to cable TV in Canada

By Heather Smirle

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Why Read This Guide?

No one likes to feel that they are overpaying for a product or service, and cable television fees have aggravated many Canadians for years. A common complaint from cable TV subscribers is that they only watch a few specific channels, but must pay for an expensive, oversized package to access them. If that sounds familiar, you may be wondering: *Am I paying too much for cable and, if so, what are my alternatives?*

In this guide, we will show you how to assess your current viewing habits, and how to determine if there are reasonable alternatives to cable TV that carry the content you want. We will look at over-the-air broadcasting, streaming services and devices, and the cost and effort needed for each cable TV alternative.

You may find you're ready to join the growing number of people who are cancelling their cable TV subscriptions, or *cord-cutting*, right away. Or you may decide that cancelling cable isn't right for you now. At the very least, completing the tasks within this guide may give you a financial basis to renegotiate with your cable TV provider.

Case study: Introduction

Karen is a 40-year-old woman who lives with her husband and two young children. Karen has become increasingly frustrated with her hefty cable bill. She doesn't think they watch enough TV to call for such a large expense, but she also doesn't want to give up the programming that her family enjoys. Karen knows cord-cutting is a growing trend, but she doesn't know if it's the right choice for her family.

Towards the end of each section, we will follow Karen as she takes steps to determine the best television viewing solution for her family.

Your task: What to expect



Each section in this guide has a different task. Completing all five tasks as instructed will show you what to expect, financially and practically, if you switch from cable to other alternatives.

Evaluating Your Viewing Habits

Before you can decide if you can replace cable, you need to know exactly what it is you want to replace. Think about the types of programming you watch, who else is watching, and when and how you watch. Consider your viewing habits and what content and functionality you value the most.

What are you watching?

What types of programming does your household currently watch? Some examples are:

- TV shows (dramas, sitcoms)
- live sports (seasons, teams, events)
- primetime reality TV
- lifestyle (cooking, home improvement)
- news (local, national, international, breaking)
- morning shows / daytime talk shows
- game shows
- live events (Oscars, etc.)
- children's programming
- late night talk shows
- documentaries, etc.

When and how are you watching?

Consider the following questions and think about what is important to you.

When do you watch your shows? Do you watch them live as they air, or do you PVR them and watch them on demand? Does your preference vary by show?

How do you watch your shows? When you sit down, do you browse through the guide to find a show you like, or do you already know exactly what you are going to watch? Do you often need to pause shows? Do you enjoy flipping around the channels during commercials or switching back and forth between games?

Who else is watching?

Consider how cancelling your cable subscription could affect the viewing habits of everyone else in your household. Are there any other things to consider?

Case study: Must-see TV

Karen has listed her family's must-see TV. She hasn't included the shows they watch on Netflix, because she knows she will keep Netflix regardless of what she does with her cable subscription. The ability to pause live broadcasts is important to her.

Karen’s list is as follows:

Table 1: Family list of must-see TV shows

Program	Current source	How and when
Game of Thrones	HBO	Watch day it airs
NFL - Patriots, Bills, all playoffs	CTV, CTV2, TSN (Sept-Feb)	Watch live
Survivor	Global	PVR, watch whenever
Top Chef / Top Chef Canada	Food Network Canada	PVR, watch whenever
Schitt’s Creek	CBC	PVR, watch whenever
The Great British Baking Show	CBC	Cast via CBC Gem app
Better Call Saul	AMC	PVR, watch whenever
VEEP	HBO	PVR, watch whenever
Last Week Tonight with John Oliver	HBO	PVR, watch next day
Kids’ programming (Shimmer and Shine, Paw Patrol, Octonauts, etc.)	Mix of TVO, Treehouse and Netflix	Choose episodes and pause
Breaking news	Global, CNN (breaking only; otherwise get news online)	Watch live
The Agenda with Steve Paikin	TVO (nice but not critical)	Watch as it airs
Olympics	CBC and NBC – every two years for a couple weeks	Watch live
Election coverage	CBC for Canada, CNN for US	Watch live
MasterChef Australia	Gusto (nice but not critical)	PVR, watch whenever
MLB - Toronto Blue Jays, all playoffs	Sportsnet (nice but not critical; we have radio)	Watch live

Your task: Write down your must-see TV



1. Create a list of your *must-see* TV – shows that you will really miss if you cancel your cable and that you want to continue watching. Include:
 - the broadcasting channel / source
 - timing, if relevant (a sports season, a special event, etc.)
 - how you typically watch (live or on demand)
2. Keep the list with you as you go through the rest of this guide.

Outlining Your Existing Set-Up

To complete your self-evaluation, you need to consider your current internet and cable services, any existing subscriptions outside of cable, and your existing hardware set-up.

How much are you paying, and for what?

How much is your current monthly cable bill? Look at your bill and see how it's broken down. What channels and services are you paying for? Are you paying rental fees for any hardware?

Also review your internet bill – find your monthly fee, download speed and data allowance.

What are your current system capacities?

Consider the following questions:

- Do you have a smart TV?
- Do you have any streaming devices, like Roku, Apple TV, or Chromecast, already in place? If so, how do you control them (via smartphone app, remote, etc.)?
- Do you ever connect your computer or laptop to your TV?
- Do you have any gaming systems like Xbox One or PlayStation 4?
- Do you have a PVR?
- How many televisions do you have, and do you need to access the same content on all of them?
- How fast is your internet, and how close to your monthly data allowance do you get every month?
- Do you rent or own your modem?

Case study: Fees and set-up

Karen has two televisions. She owns one HD terminal and rents one HD/PVR terminal. She also has a Chromecast on each TV that they use for streaming Netflix and YouTube. The adults control the Chromecasts through their smartphones; the kids cannot access Netflix or YouTube on their own.

Karen has reviewed her bills in detail. She bundles her cable, internet, and home phone through the same provider. Her current packages for cable and internet are no longer available and her contract is up for renewal. She would prefer to keep her home phone but wants a cheaper option. They use their cell phones for all calls and only keep their home phone for the kids' sake.

Karen's review is as follows:

Table 2: Detailed list of costs and services

Item on cable bill	Notes	Monthly fee
Extra Plus	grandfathered (gets us sports, HBO, etc.)	\$84.99
NextBox HD Terminal Rental	this is the PVR box, we own the other one	\$12.95
Digital Services Fee	no idea what this is	\$2.99

Item on cable bill	Notes	Monthly fee
Lifestyle Theme Pack	grandfathered (gets us Food Network, Gusto, etc.)	\$5.99
Total (including HST)		\$120.82
Streaming services	Notes	Monthly fee
Netflix Canada – Standard Plan	HD, can watch two screens at once (includes HST)	\$13.99
Total (HST not applicable)		\$13.99
Item on internet bill	Notes	Monthly fee
Hybrid Fibre 100 320GB	320 GB of data per month Download speed 100mbps, upload speed 10mbps	\$74.99
Advanced Wi-Fi Modem Rental	-	\$12.00
Total (including HST)		\$98.30
Home phone	Notes	Monthly fee
Essentials Plan	Local only; Canada/US long distance 20¢ /min	\$40.91
Total (including HST)		\$46.23

Your task: Write down your fees and set-up details



1. Write down all the monthly fees, taxes included, for your cable and internet services. Include:
 - the breakdown of your cable bill
 - any additional content subscriptions (Netflix, DAZN, etc.)
 - your internet package
 - any other services bundled with your cable
2. Write down what hardware you own, what you rent, and your internet download speed and monthly data allowance.
3. Add this to your must-see TV list and keep it with you as you go through the rest of this guide.

Linking Your Content to Alternate Sources

There are many different sources of television content besides cable. Some are free, some are paid subscription or pay-per-episode models. Content availability changes all the time.

At the end of this section, you will link your must-see TV to sources besides cable. Begin by considering the following cable TV alternatives:

- [Over-the-air \(OTA\) television broadcasting](#)
- [Canadian networks' websites](#)
- [Over-the-top \(OTT\) subscription services](#)
- [Purchased or borrowed content](#)

Over-the-air (OTA) television broadcasting (free)



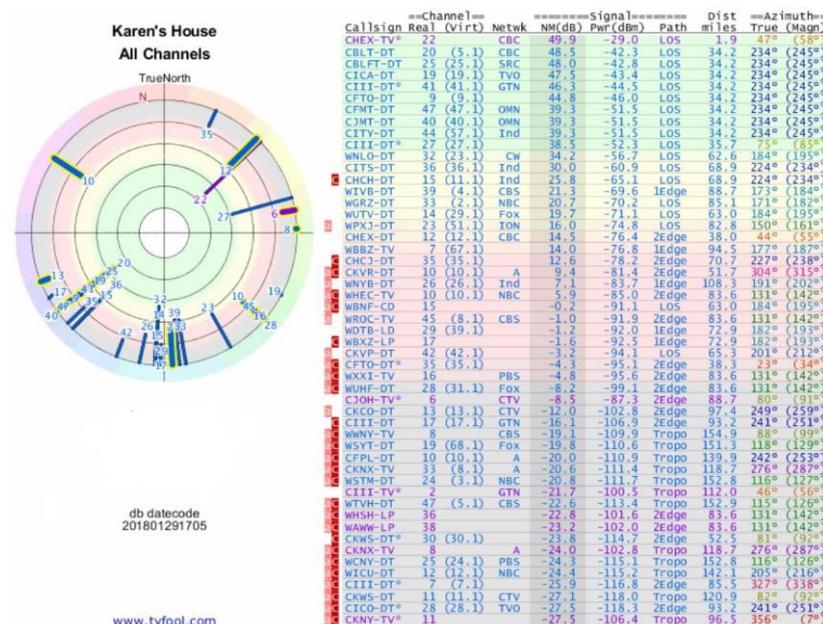
Over-the-air (OTA) broadcasting is a free wireless television service. According to the CRTC, many Canadians rely on OTA local television for their news and information programming. With a television and an antenna, you can likely access several free digital channels, even without a cable subscription. It all depends on how close you live to a transmitter and what signal strength you get.

Normally you view OTA content as it airs. You can also purchase an OTA DVR (digital video recorder) if you prefer to record shows to watch on your schedule.



To get a sense of the OTA channels you may be able to access from where you are, go to TV Fool at <https://www.tvfool.com/> and check your address for free TV. Channels are listed from strongest to weakest signal strength.

Figure 1: TV Fool report showing OTA signals in northeast Oshawa



Canadian networks' websites (free)

Many Canadian networks have apps that require a cable subscription to access their content. However, those same networks post free content on their websites. You can find latest episodes of current shows, complete series of older shows, kids' shows, news programming, and movies.

Here are some of the networks that do not require a cable subscription to access their content when viewed with a Canadian IP (Internet Protocol) address.

- Global: <https://www.globaltv.com/>
- Global News: <https://globalnews.ca/videos/>
- City TV: <https://www.citytv.com/>
- CTV: <https://www.ctv.ca/>
- CBC: <https://gem.cbc.ca/>
- TVA: <http://tva.canoe.ca/>
- Omni: <https://www.omnitv.ca/>
- APTN: <https://aptn.ca/>
- Food Network Canada: <https://www.foodnetwork.ca/>
- TVO Kids: <https://tvokids.com/>
- TVO: <https://www.tvo.org/>



If you don't have cable, you can usually only access the latest episodes of current television shows for a short period of time (e.g., 7 days) before they are locked to non-subscribers.

Over-the-top (OTT) subscription services (\$)

Canadians can stream a vast amount of television content over the internet using over-the-top (OTT) subscription services. You can watch most subscription services with smart TVs, streaming devices, game consoles, and/or internet browsers. Some services even allow you to download content to watch offline.

Please note that the author of this guide does not condone streaming content while using a VPN (Virtual Private Network) to dodge regional restrictions. While VPNs themselves are not illegal in Canada, using them to hide your location and watch foreign content violates most subscription services' user agreements.

TV shows and movies

The following table lists popular subscription services in Canada and their pricing as of April 2019. Unless you have paid annually, you can stop or start subscriptions at any time without penalty – you only pay for the time you need to watch the content you want.

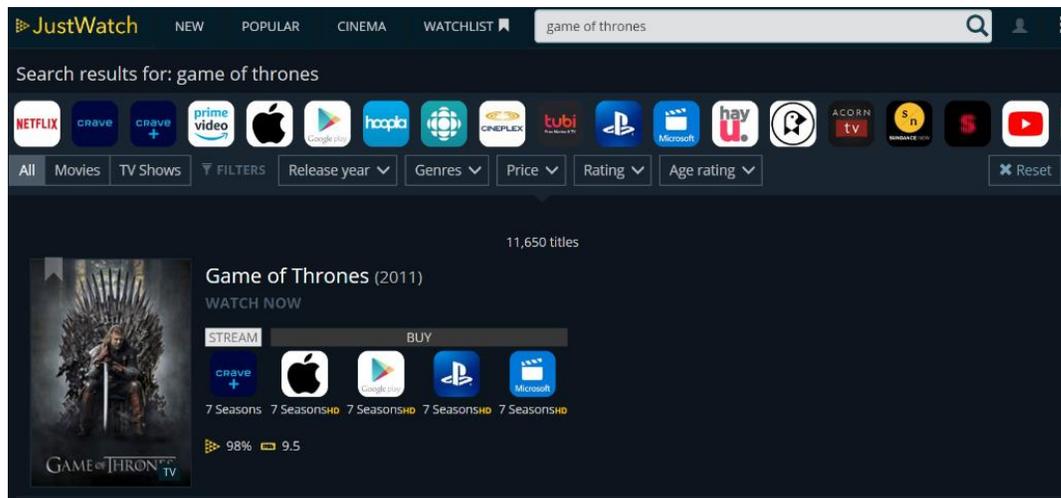
Table 3: Popular streaming subscription services in Canada

Service	Notes
Netflix Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robust library of TV shows, movies and exclusive content • Three levels of monthly subscription <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Basic – \$9.99 (no HD, watch on one screen at a time) ○ Standard - \$13.99 (HD, two screens at once) ○ Premium - \$16.99 (HD, Ultra HD, four screens at once)
Crave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library includes Showtime, classic HBO, TV shows and exclusive content • Subscribe by month: \$9.99
Crave +Movies +HBO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the Crave content plus current HBO shows and latest movies • Subscribe by month: \$19.98
Prime Video	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library includes TV shows, movies and exclusive content • Included with Amazon Prime subscription • If you don't have Amazon Prime, subscribe by month: \$7.99 or by year: \$79.99 (\$6.67/mo.)
CBS All-Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New episodes of current daytime, primetime and late-night CBS shows are available 7 days after they air • Incomplete on-demand library of past seasons and older shows • Subscribe by month: \$5.99
Britbox	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library of current and classic BBC and ITV content • Subscribe by month: \$8.99, or by year: \$89.99 (\$7.50/mo.)
Acorn TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library of British, Irish and Australian TV • Subscribe by month: \$7.49



To find cable alternatives in Canada by show, go to <https://www.justwatch.com/ca> and search by the show's name. JustWatch shows availability by show and whether it can be streamed or bought.

Figure 2: JustWatch search results for "Game of Thrones" (April 2019)



Live sports

If you only follow one specific sport or team, consider going directly to the league or team website and look for a dedicated subscription option. Be mindful of blackouts and team regional restrictions.

If you are a sports enthusiast, you may want to consider one of these services or something similar.

Table 4: Popular sports streaming subscriptions in Canada

Service	Notes
DAZN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has streaming rights to every NFL game, Major League Soccer, MLB (but not Toronto Blue Jays), and more • Subscribe by month: \$20
TSN Direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live stream hockey, including NHL and Team Canada plus the CFL, NFL, World Juniors, NBA, MLS, tennis, golf, curling, and more • Subscribe by month: \$19.99, or buy a day pass: \$4.99
Sportsnet NOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live stream all Sportsnet's sports and channels – includes NHL, NBA, MLB (including Toronto Blue Jays), CHL, WWE, and more • Two levels of content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SN NOW: \$19.99 (300+ NHL games, regional blackouts) ○ SN NOW+: \$27.99 (rugby, FA Cup, Indy Car, and 500+ NHL games, limited blackouts) Can also subscribe to SN NOW+ by year: \$249.99 (\$20.83/mo.)

Purchased or borrowed content

If you are looking for one specific TV show and don't want access to an entire library, you can often buy or rent individual episodes or seasons of shows. In certain cases, you can even borrow it for free.

Pay on demand (\$)

Many online stores carry movies and television shows that you can buy by episode or by season. Popular choices with a lot of content include Apple iTunes, Google Play, and Microsoft Store.

Hoopla (free)

Most Canadian libraries offer their card holders free access to Hoopla, a digital media platform that lets users borrow books, movies and TV shows. You can watch Hoopla content online or use streaming devices to watch it on your TV. Hoopla does not contain current episodes of TV shows. It has a lot of CBC, PBS and BBC content.



Although you have free access to Hoopla with your library card, your library pays per title borrowed. Most libraries cap the number of episodes or movies you can borrow monthly, typically at 10-12. Choose wisely!

Case study: Alternate sources

Karen has linked as much of her must-see TV as possible to alternate sources. She started by checking available OTA broadcast channels in her area using <https://www.tvfool.com/>. She then looked for free content on the network websites, followed by a search on <https://www.justwatch.com/ca> for OTT content. Her list is as follows:

Table 5: Content linked to alternate sources

Alternate sources	Must-see TV	Monthly Cost
OTA broadcasting	Survivor (Global) * Schitt's Creek (CBC) * Kids' programming (TVO) * Breaking news * The Agenda with Steve Paikin (TVO) * Olympics (CBC) * NFL Football (some games, CTV) * also available on network websites	-
Network websites	Top Chef (Food Network Canada) The Great British Baking Show (CBC) Election coverage (Canada: CBC, US: CNN)	-
Crave +Movies +HBO (immediate content)	Game of Thrones VEEP Last Week Tonight with John Oliver	\$22.59 (includes HST)
Netflix (already have this)	Better Call Saul (one season behind) Kids' programming	\$13.99
DAZN / Sportsnet NOW	DAZN: NFL (Sept – Feb) ** Sportsnet NOW: MLB (April – Oct) ** ** time-sensitive subscription; monthly cost reflects total spread over 12 months	\$23.17 (includes HST)

Your task: Link your must-see TV to alternate sources



1. Link the content of your list of must-see TV to alternate sources. Consider the following as you research:
 - If it's a subscription service, will you need it all year, or only for a few months at a time?
 - How much of your content is available through OTA broadcasting or accessible online through network websites?
2. Write out all possible sources for each of your shows and the associated costs.
3. Group your content together under the fewest sources possible.

Determining Your Set-Up Requirements

Now that you have found your television shows outside of cable, you must identify what equipment you need to watch them. For example:

- If you want to watch OTA content, consider an antenna.
- If you want to watch OTT content on your (not smart) television, consider a streaming device.

You also need to consider the importance of:

- Parental controls
- User interface and ease of use
- Dedicated remote controls

Choosing an antenna

To watch OTA content, you need an antenna. To determine what type of antenna you need, consider which channels you want to watch and their signal strength relative to your address (check at <https://www.tvfool.com/>). Antennas come in a variety of price points, signal ranges, and installation types.

Indoor antennas are the cheapest solution. You can place them on a window or on a wall by the TV. They are a good choice if you have strong local channels, and easily installed without professional help.



If you are unsure of the reception you will get, try an indoor antenna first. Make sure your vendor has a good return policy – if you don't get the content you want, return it and try something bigger.

If you want channels that have weaker signals or are further away, you may need a larger antenna in your attic space or on your roof. An attic antenna is easier to install and maintain than an outdoor antenna, but the signal strength will not be as clear. An outdoor antenna will give you the best reception, but it is the most expensive choice and often needs to be professionally installed. Note that attic and outdoor antennas are normally not viable options for those who live in apartments or condos.

As you test your antenna, note that location significantly affects reception. An indoor antenna in a window may pull in several more channels than the same antenna on a wall, and your rooftop antenna may only work facing one way. Play with what you have and find the best location for the channels you want.

If you want to watch OTA content on your own schedule, consider an antenna with an OTA recording device. For some user reviews on antennas, recording devices, and OTA results in Canada, visit the forum at <https://www.digitalhome.ca/forum/81-over-air-ota-digital-television/>.

Choosing a streaming device

To stream content from applications like Netflix or DAZN, provided you don't already have a smart TV or a gaming system capable of streaming, you need an additional streaming device.

There are several ways of configuring your television and computer set-up to get specific content. The following table compares four popular devices that are easy to set up and get running, even for non-technical people. If none of these appeal to you, or if you think you need a combination of platforms, do more research – there is bound to be a device suited to your needs.

Table 6: Popular streaming devices in Canada

	Roku Streaming Stick+	Apple TV 4K 64GB	Amazon Fire Stick 4K	Chromecast Ultra
Comes with remote	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (uses smartphone, tablet or PC)
Physical hardware	Dongle at back of TV	Box that sits by TV	Dongle at back of TV	Dongle at back of TV
	Plugs into HDMI port and is powered by TV USB port or USB wall adapter			
Parental controls	Ratings restrictions enforced with password protection. For families with young children, we recommend parental oversight instead of trusting a ratings system.		Person using casting device controls all content.	
	3rd party apps (e.g., Netflix) need individual controls			
Channel availability	Good	Excellent, but does not support Google Play. Good choice if you're an avid Apple user.	Excellent, but does not support Google Play.	Very good. Can not mirror web content from Apple devices, but streams any Google Cast-compatible app. 
Retail price (04/19)	\$90	\$250	\$70	\$75
<p><i>Note: This table does not include Android boxes. While the boxes themselves are legal in Canada, they often come loaded with content that is not. For that reason, they are left out of this guide.</i></p>				

Checking your internet speed and capacity

If you are planning to use OTT content as an alternative to cable, you want it to be smooth. Because Netflix is the most popular streaming provider in Canada, we use their internet speed recommendations in this guide.

Netflix suggests 5 Mbps to stream HD content and 25 Mbps for 4K Ultra HD content. That is a bare minimum. Invest in faster download speeds if more than one device will be connected at any given time. 150 Mbps is a good fit for families who may have multiple streams happening at once.

Case study: Additional set-up requirements

Karen is going to try an indoor antenna because TV Fool says the OTA channels she wants are in the green zone. A good, multi-directional antenna mounted indoors should cost about \$75.

She will also need to spend \$30 on a remote control for one of her TVs if she turns in her cable remote, because they have lost the original TV remote.

Karen already has two Chromecasts that she uses to cast Netflix and YouTube from her iPhone. As her children are still young, she wants streaming access to remain completely within the adults' control, so she will keep Chromecasts as her main streaming devices. She can use her laptop instead of her iPhone to cast network website content twice a week and, apart from live OTA, she can stream everything else on demand.

Karen's internet speed is adequate for now. She will watch her data usage in case the extra streaming needs more capacity. She plans to shop around for a better deal since she knows she will lose her bundling discount if she drops cable.

Your task: Estimate additional hardware costs and set-up requirements



1. Decide if you need an antenna.
 - If so, determine if you need an indoor antenna, an attic-mounted antenna, or a rooftop antenna.
 - Get a few quotes, including installation costs if applicable.
 2. Decide if you need a new streaming device.
 - If so, review specifications, ease of use, parental controls and costs to find the device that best suits your needs.
 - Always check the device's official website to confirm functionality and channel availability in Canada.
 3. Decide if you need to change your internet package.
 - If you need to increase your internet capacity, get quotes from different providers who can meet your speed and download needs.
 - If your costs seem high, shop around for similar data and speed packages in the market. Check user reviews.
-

Evaluating Current State versus Future State

By now, you have evaluated your viewing habits, outlined your existing set-up, linked your must-see TV to alternate sources, and determined what equipment you would need to view all your content outside of cable. It's time to answer the final question: does it make sense for you to cancel your cable subscription?

Cost comparison

The main reason to cancel your cable is to save money. If you were to cut the cord today but keep the content you want, how much money would you save? Compare your current costs to:

- Potential costs of new streaming subscriptions needed
- Potential costs of additional hardware needed, as well as its longevity (i.e. how many years do you think you'll get out of the new equipment?)
- Potential costs of changes needed to your internet package

Content expectations

Have you given enough thought to all the content you would be giving up? Of course, depending on the cable alternatives you choose, you could also be gaining a lot of access to new content. There will almost certainly be some trade-offs; it is up to you to decide if they're worthwhile.

Just make sure you have clearly identified your must-see TV and have your alternate sources fully mapped out before making your final decision.

Ease of use

For some people, the ease of being able to turn on a TV and see all content on one platform outweighs cost considerations. And that's fair. Other people don't mind using a remote to change between HDMI ports, or are comfortable mirroring content from their phones or tablets to a television screen. Again, it's important to know who will be using the TV and what they will be watching. You need to be realistic about what you're comfortable with because TV watching should be relaxing, not a constant challenge.



Just remember: *alternatives to cable are only as complicated as you make them*. Since the solutions in this guide do not involve using a VPN or accessing foreign subscriptions, they are not overly difficult to set up or to use.

Case study: Karen’s decision

Karen has decided to cancel her entire package (cable, internet and home phone) with her current provider. She will switch her internet and home phone to another provider. She estimates cancelling her existing package will save her almost \$1,500 annually, with an initial expense of about \$85. Here is her final review:

Table 7: Current and future cost comparison

Service	Monthly cost*		Notes
	Current	Future	
Cable TV	\$120.82	-	Cancel this service.
Netflix	\$13.99	\$13.99	Keep this service.
Crave +Movies +HBO	-	\$22.59	Add this service.
DAZN / Sportsnet NOW (split)	-	\$23.17	Add this service.
Internet	\$98.30	\$77.91	The new provider offers faster speeds (150Mbps download, 15Mbps upload) and unlimited data. The activation fee is waived and there are no hidden costs or time commitments.
Home phone	\$46.23	\$16.89	The new provider offers 100 long distance minutes a month. The home phone number will remain the same, but the technology will switch from a land line to VoIT (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology.
Total	\$279.34	\$154.55	Current state: \$3,352.08 annually Future state: \$1,854.64 annually A difference of: \$1,497.44 annually

* includes all applicable taxes

Karen has purchased an OTA antenna from Amazon (Winegard Flatwave Indoor, \$65.75 including tax). The new remote will cost her \$19.20, so her total initial equipment investment will be \$84.95. Allowing for that expense, Karen will still save over \$1,400 in the first year alone.

Given her family’s viewing habits and the potential annual savings, Karen has decided that cutting cable is a risk she is willing to take! If she later decides to upgrade her antenna to get more OTA channels, add OTR recording capabilities, or invest in new streaming devices to increase ease of use, she believes it will still be well worth it.

Your task: Evaluate and choose your TV solution



1. Compare your current costs to your projected future costs.
 - How much money will you save if you cut cable?
 - How much money do you need to spend on equipment to get the content you want?
 2. Compare the content you have been able to link to alternative sources.
 - Have you been able to find most of your content from a source that will meet your viewing needs?
 3. Compare the ease of use of your current set-up to what your set-up would be if you were to cut cable.
 - Is your projected set-up reasonably easy to use and accessible as needed?
 4. Consider all of the above. Do you think the potential cost savings outweigh the convenience of cable TV?
 - If no, call your cable TV provider and tell them how much money cancelling cable would save you. They may give you a deal to keep your business.
 - If yes... cut the cord!
-