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Millennials Unearth an Amazing Hack to Get Free TV: the Antenna

Cord-cutters accustomed to watching shows online are often shocked that \$20 ‘rabbit ears’ pluck signals from the air; is this legal?



Dan Sisco has discovered a technology that allows him to access half a dozen major TV channels, completely free.

“I was just kind of surprised that this is technology that exists,” says Mr. Sisco, 28 years old. “It’s been awesome. It doesn’t log out and it doesn’t skip.”

Let’s hear a round of applause for TV antennas, often called “rabbit ears,” a technology invented roughly seven decades

ago, long before there was even a cord to be cut, which had been consigned to the technology trash can along with cassette tapes and VCRs.

The antenna is mounting a quiet comeback, propelled by a generation that never knew life before cable television, and who primarily watch Netflix, Hulu and HBO via the internet. Antenna sales in the U.S. are projected to rise 7% in 2017 to nearly 8 million units, according to the Consumer Technology Association, a trade group.

Mr. Sisco, an M.B.A. student in Provo, Utah, made his discovery after inviting friends over to watch the Super Bowl in 2014. The online stream he found to watch the game didn’t have regular commercials—disappointing half of his guests who were only interested in the ads.

“An antenna was not even on my radar,” he says. He went online and discovered he could buy one for \$20 and watch major networks like ABC, NBC, Fox and CBS free.

There is typically no need to climb on a rooftop. While some indoor antennas still look like old-fashioned rabbit ears, many modern antennas are thin sheets that can be hidden behind a flat TV or hung like a picture frame.

But many consumers still aren’t getting the signal.

Carlos Villalobos, 21, who was selling tube-shaped digital antennas at a swap meet in San Diego recently, says customers often ask if his \$20 to \$25 products are legal. “They don’t trust me when I say that these are actually free local channels,” he says.



Earlier this year, he got an earful from a woman who didn't get it. "She was mad," he recalls. "She says, 'No, you can't live in America for free, what are you talking about?'"

Almost a third of Americans (29%) are unaware local TV is available free, according to a June survey by the National Association of Broadcasters, an industry trade group.

Since the dawn of television, the major networks have broadcast signals over the airwaves. It is free after buying an antenna, indoor or outdoor, and plugging it into your

TV set. It still exists, though now most consumers have switched to cable television, which includes many more channels and costs upward of \$100 a month.



Much of the confusion dates to federal legislation that required broadcasters to stop sending analog signals in 2009 and shift high-definition digital transmissions. The change meant old TVs wouldn't get the broadcasts, forcing consumers buy new televisions or converter boxes to pick up the free signals.

Scott Wills, a wireless-industry executive living in the San Francisco Bay Area, worked for over a year on the legislation that set the transition in motion. Mr. Wills discussed his

work extensively with his son, who was almost a teenager at the time.

About a decade later, Mr. Wills had a hunch many people, especially young people, thought the transition simply killed TV signals, rather than made them better. He asked his son.

"His answer was, 'Dad, you should know better than anyone that there's no broadcast TV!'" Mr. Wills recalls. "He thought broadcast TV went away."

His son, Hunter, now 24 and living in Chicago, says he mostly watches Netflix. "I had no idea," he said of broadcast's continued existence. "I'm still not even that familiar with the concept."

The Federal Communications Commission spent millions on a campaign to educate the public about the digital TV transition and Congress set aside more than \$2 billion to help consumers pay for converters so old TV sets could process digital signals. But the focus was largely on older people who already relied on antennas.

William Lake oversaw the agency's effort. A few years later, when he offered to buy an antenna for one of his daughters, then in her early 20s, so she and her roommates could get live TV, she had no idea what he was talking about.

"She thought it was some modern satellite service or something," the former FCC official says. In 2013, during a congressional hearing about the satellite-television industry, the discussion turned to a contract dispute that temporarily left Time Warner Cable subscribers unable to watch CBS.



“Can I make one point?” said Gerard Waldron, an attorney who testified on behalf of the National Association of Broadcasters. “I just want to emphasize that broadcast is a free, over the air service. So during the so-called blackout, the service was available 100% of the time. I realize that some people might not have antennas, or some people might have reception problems, but I do want to emphasize...”

“So I could have seen CBS if I had rabbit ears?”

Congresswoman Karen Bass (D-Calif.) interjected. “I don’t think people knew that.”

A spokesman for Rep. Bass said she was aware TV antennas existed, just not that the station was still broadcast during a cable blackout.



Richard Schneider, founder of a St. Louis manufacturing company called Antennas Direct, says his occupation results in awkward small talk. “If I’m at a party and I tell people what I do for a living, they’ll say, ‘That’s still a thing?’ I’d think you’d be out of business by now.”

Quite the opposite. He started selling antennas as a hobby more than 15 years ago and only expected to sell a few hundred each year. He says he sold 75,000 antennas in June. Even the latest high-definition flat-screen TVs

need an antenna to get free broadcasts.

Michelle Herrick, 39, a photographer in Phoenix, says she was desperate to cancel her cable subscription after her bill topped \$200 a month. The only reason she hadn’t was because she wanted local stations.

Then, about two years ago, her mother told her about modern antennas. Now, Ms. Herrick is the one who regularly has to explain to puzzled guests how she’s able to watch free television. “Everyone I talked to, they had no idea.”

Even for those who have an antenna it can take some getting used to. In May, Robert Tomlinson, a 21-year-old college student in Kalamazoo, Mich., was bummed when he couldn’t stream ABC’s “Dancing With The Stars” online. Then, he remembered his antenna. “I just forgot it was there.”

