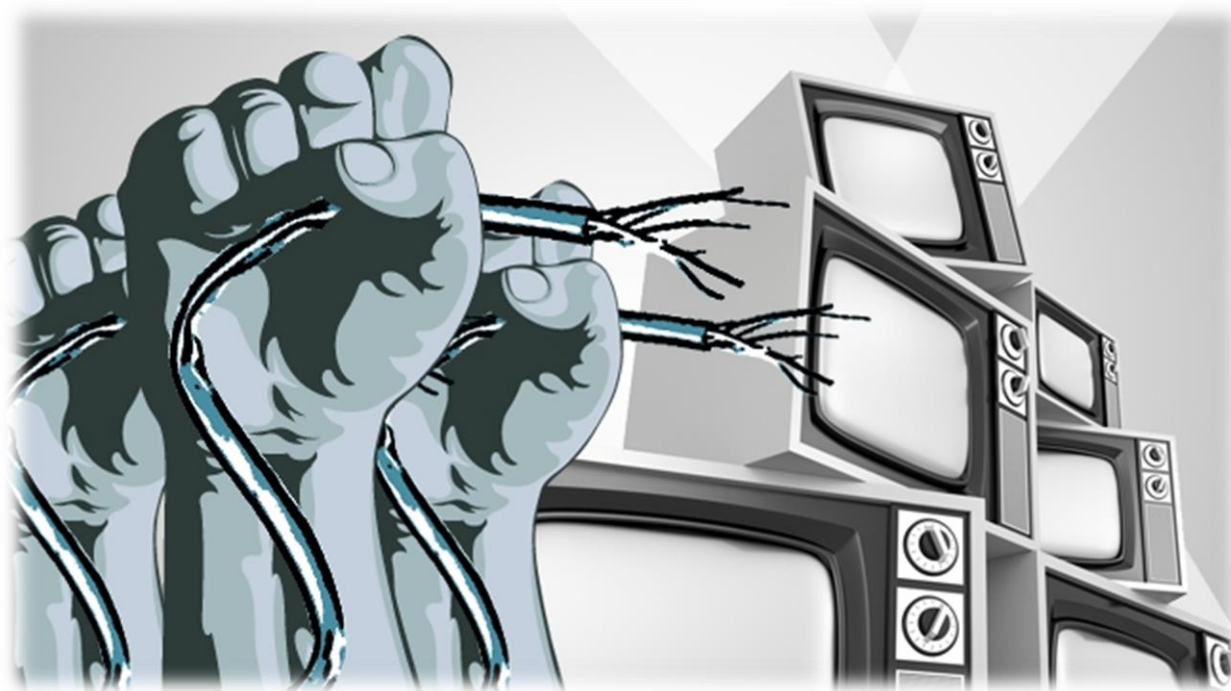


The Effects of The Cord-Cutting Counterpublic

How the Dynamics of Resistance and Resilience between the
Cord-Cutters and the Television Distribution Industry Are
Redefining Television



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*To my parents, Donatella and Piergiovanni,
and to my little sister, Elena*

“La televisiun, la g'ha na forza de leun;
la televisiun, la g'ha paura de nisun.”

“Television is as strong as a lion;
Television fears nobody.”

Enzo Jannacci. *La Televisiun*. 1975.

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Abstract

To cut or not to cut? This is the question that many viewers are asking themselves nowadays. The cord-cutting phenomenon concerns those newfound watching behaviours that induce certain viewers to snip their cable cord, dropping pay-TV services, and seeking for alternative ways of accessing television content such as over-the-top television providers, free over-the-air television, and more or less legal online platforms for streaming and downloading a personalized television menu. These viewers attempt to circumvent the established television system and its calcified institutional and legal norms that are constraining their televisual experience, whereas the television industry tries to stop this leakage and contain its possible disruptive effects. Marginal but worrisome, this phenomenon is emerging in the midst of our digital convergent culture, and it can actually be considered as symptomatic of today's larger redefinition of television and the relative shifts in audience practices. Within this scenario, my work culturally and theoretically frames this current and fast-developing trend, conceptualizing it as a burgeoning counterpublic whose symbolic power is affecting both the notion of television, as well as, the political-economic dynamics of the television industry. Indeed, on the one hand the symbolic power of the cord-cutting counterpublic is re-shaping the cultural and social construction of television, and legitimating newfound viewing behaviours that revolutionize the classical idea of 'TV.' On the other hand, the cutters are entering and altering the power interplay of the television distribution industry. In particular, from a critical analysis of the dynamics of resistance and resilience between cutters and the television distribution platforms, a mutually transforming effect is emerging that is fundamental for the future developments of our 'post-television world.'

Preface

Television as Cross-Media Techno-Cultural Form

What is television today? And what is television's future? These questions have pervaded "industry boardrooms, university classrooms, and popular culture alike" (Spigel 2004, 1), since television is, and has always been, a transient medium that is constantly adjusting to changing cultural, technological, political and economic contexts. Actually, as screen culture professor Lynn Spigel states, discussions that explicitly position television as 'in transition' hark back at least as far as Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson's 1986 collection *Television in Transition* (Spigel 2015, 86). Moreover, today this discourse is common both in Media Studies and in the television industry. But of course television technology has never been stable, from the development of pre-recorded content and colour, to the more recent shifts from cable and satellite to Internet production, distribution and reception practices (Evans 2011, 1). Such instability - or adaptability - is partially due to the intrinsic nature of television whose value is placed on its ability to relay and to act as a hybrid of other media forms (Jacob 2000). Indeed, as television scholar Jason Jacob further argues, that hybridity – together with intimacy and mobility - emerges as a key discourse around the notion of television and it concerns every facet of this concept (2000).

However, with recent developments such as the Internet and mobile technologies, today we are experiencing a moment of accelerated change both within the television industry and the daily lives of viewers. In this regard, comparative media scholar William Uricchio argues that "the digital turn has accelerated the challenges to the ontological distinctions amongst established media, offering both new definitional conceits and new media forms with wide-ranging implications for traditional media" (2009, 25). Today, many critics proclaim the end of 'TV' as in the classical form of television, and speak of multiple transformations leading to a new era where television is redefined not only as a techno-cultural form, but also as an institution, an industry, a programming practice and an audience practice.¹ Different notions have been conceptualized to describe this new television phase, from 'the phase that comes after "TV"' (Spigel 2004, 2); the 'Post-Network Era' (Lotz 2009); the 'Post-Broadcast Era' (Turner and Tay 2009); 'New Television' (Moran 2009);

¹ There is a substantial difference between the terms 'TV' and 'television.' Throughout my work I use 'TV' to indicate the more classical form of television, referring in particular to the configuration of the medium typical of the historical period between the 1950s and 1980s. Whereas, by 'television' I mean the fuller unstable medium, in constant transition and endlessly morphing over time.

‘Transmedia Television’ (Evans 2011); or ‘Post-television’ (Levine 2011; Lotz 2007; Strangelove 2015). Even though, they draw the attention to different aspects of the ongoing redefinition of television, fundamentally they all attempt to grasp and define the current shifts recognizing the medium’s current heterogeneity from television-as-it-used-to-be and therefore implying that “television once had a stable identity that is now being called into question” (Keilbach and Stauff 2013, 79). In other words, it appears that even though the television medium “never sat still” (Keilbach and Stauff 2013, 80), the classical idea of ‘TV’ has been stabilized in the popular imagination as having a presumably stable form. However, current changes in production, distribution and reception practices are prompting an ever-increasing disruptive effect on such presumably stable form. Actually, given the “multifaceted technologies and uses of television”, it is no longer even certain if television is still a distinct medium, or if we need to re-think it as “televisions” (Lotz 2007, 78).

Being aware of the various concepts and theories needed to frame the notion of television in relation to the changing viewing behaviours, I will use as a starting point the notion of “transmedia television” given by media scholar Elizabeth Evans (2011). In particular, my thesis focuses on the interplay between the television’s distribution system and the reception practices of a particular fringe audience known as ‘cord-cutters,’ with the aim of analysing how these dynamics are influencing the re-definition of television’s every facet. In this sense, Evans’ notion of “transmedia television” is useful since it focuses on today’s changes in distribution and reception practices as television content is made available simultaneously or near-simultaneously on online/offline multimedia platforms, and moreover, it relates those shifts to the emergence of online television services (2011, 2), such as Over-The-Top (OTT) television providers.² From this perspective, transmedia television can be understood as “a non-site specific, hybrid cultural and technological form that spreads across multiple [media] platforms” (Evans 2011, 2), and it is constantly shaped by the industry’s as well as the consumers’ practices. This concept of transmediality, though, differs from Henry Jenkins’ notion of “transmedia storytelling” (2006) in which various elements of the same story populate different platforms. In Evans’ sense instead, transmediality refers to the migration of the same (narrative) content from the traditional TV set to other distribution platforms,

² The term Over-The-Top television is used to describe one of the most recent and potentially disruptive developments in the broadcasting industry: TV content distributed over the Internet without the involvement of a multiple-system operator in the control or distribution of the content (*OECD Communications Outlook 2013* 12). Usually such OTT TV is provided by content owners (such as BBC, HBO, or Hulu), or dedicated start-up players (such as Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, or Roku) without the internet service provider (ISP) or network operator being involved either in the control of the content or its access by viewers (*OECD Communications Outlook 2013* 12). Principal characteristic of OTT TV is that it can be delivered by various distribution platforms and it is accessible on multiple devices that access the internet - connected televisions, smartphones, laptops, tablets and so forth.

leading to a multimedia televisual experience that includes various media platforms, as diverse as mobile phones, game consoles, tablets or laptops; online video services such as YouTube, Netflix or Popcorn Time; and computer-based media-players such as Microsoft's Windows Media Player, Chromecast and Apple TV.³ Other scholars, who hew to Jenkins' definition of 'transmedia' refers to the process Evans' describes as a 'cross-media' strategy.

In the wake of Evans' work, I would suggest that today's television can be understood as a non-site specific, hybrid techno-cultural form. However, the television medium is not 'transmedia' per se, rather I would argue that it spreads across digital media platforms, leading to a wide variety of conceptions of television that as a whole can be interpreted as a hybrid techno-cultural form which takes up the characteristic of the classical idea of TV combining them with today's multimedia online/offline experiences of television. In this sense, cross-mediality would better describe the current status of television, and it is not simply intended as mere programming that moves from platform to platform, but it is a more fundamental characteristic of the medium itself that is capable of this plurality. In other words, today television's nature is intrinsically hybridized as it constantly morphs adapting to changing environment and re-inventing itself also thanks to merger in its techno-cultural form of different elements from the various other media with which it come into contact. To this regard, Bennet and Strange state that we are now experiencing "television as digital media" almost provocatively claiming that today's digital television is actually a form of "new media" (2011). I partially disagree with this definition because it seems that digital media have disrupted television, whilst I would rather interpret the effect of this tight embedment as the (ongoing) transformation and adaptation of television in a cross-media and digital context. Nevertheless, these authors make an important contribution by positioning television within "the wider digital culture of matrix media and multiple windows, producing understanding of television as digital media as a complex interplay of sites, screen, technologies, industries, economies, aesthetics, national and global contexts, domestics and public viewing spaces, citizenship and consumers functions community and fragmentation, as well as new and established productions, user and audiences practices" (Bennet and Strange 2011, 5). Thus, although the future might belong to the Web, mobile video and new digital media, television will survive, since in the end what is actually replacing television nowadays is, television (Rothenberg). In other words, "TV is dead! Long live television!" (Frost 2014).

³ The various platforms hereby mentioned will be further explain in the third chapter, while discussing the dynamics of resistance and resilience between the cutters and the distribution platforms.

1

Introduction

Cord-Cutting 101: A Revolution Has Begun

1.1. Changing Habits in a Changing Ecosystem

Until 6 years ago I used to watch my favourite shows and television programs via a ‘traditional’ TV set placed in my living room. For instance, *The Simpsons*’ episode after lunch was a must for my sister Elena and me, and you could have found us sitting on the couch watching it almost every day! Then, when I moved to Milan for my studies, my viewing habits slowly started to change. I was not satisfied with what the Italian broadcasting system was offering and although I still watched the news and certain programs on my TV set, the Internet was increasingly becoming my primary source of information as well as entertainment. Finally, when I came to the Netherlands for my research master, I accessed television content only via Internet and watched it through various mobile devices. Snip: the cable cord was cut! The motives for this cut were multiple. Firstly, I couldn’t afford a proper TV set - students’ budgets are tight! Moreover, the channels broadcast did not match my interests, and due to the language differences, I could not understand most of the Dutch programs. In a nutshell, I experienced the mantra that media professionals and journalists have been uttering in the past decade: I wanted to watch whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and on whatever device I had available. Downloading and streaming through Netflix, Popcorn Time, or online websites of broadcasters like BBC, CNN and RAI; browsing YouTube videos; using my smartphone and laptop to access television content; sharing bits and pieces on multimedia platforms and social media: this all became essential parts of my television experience. No strings attached, no cable, and possibly a good price deal for my personalized menu of television. Then, one day, our student housing company informed us that, due to the establishment of a new partnership, every apartment would receive cable television (digital and analogue) and broadband Internet service

from Ziggo, the largest television cable company in the Netherlands.⁴ I was bewildered: the same Internet service that allowed me to ‘cut the cable cord’ was provided by the biggest Dutch cable company! This contradictory situation showed me how the television and the Internet industry are becoming part of an increasingly networked ecosystem, a complex playground that involves multiple players, from cable and telecommunication companies, to broadcasters and viewers. My short experience as a cord-cutter prompted my interest in these dynamics, which are symptomatic of a larger redefinition of television where political, economic, technological and social interests are at stake. Thus, what I find appealing in the ‘cord-cutting’ is how such a marginal and generational phenomenon can reveal useful insights into television’s broader shifts in today’s Internet convergent era.

With the term ‘cord-cutting’ I refer to the television watching behaviours of a particular type of proactive viewers who are ‘cutting the cord’ of the traditional television cable or a satellite video subscription, in favour of OTT alternatives accessed through a broadband connection in the form of streamed or downloaded content (Banerjee, Rappoport, and Alleman 2013, 19-20). As research conducted by *The Guardian* shows, in recent years, the admittedly modest ranks of cord-cutters have been growing, adding to the incipient rebellion around pay-TV (Kasperkevic 2014). Thus, despite their marginal presence, cord-cutting behaviours are expanding at a fast pace, and in response the industry is adopting several measures to curb these changing viewing habits and their potentially disruptive effects. It is not mere luck of the draw that *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO’s most famous but also most pirated show, can now “float free from cable clutches” (Moylan 2014) together with many other on-demand services. Thus, we see that the cutters are prompting alternative viewing behaviours that make use of the new affordances of the Internet and of the new configurations of today’s delivery technologies and televisual interfaces. At the same time though, these proactive viewers are also entering and influencing the growing corporate struggle between the Internet-based companies (e.g. Google, Apple, Amazon, and Netflix), the older established cable companies (e.g. Comcast, Verizon FiOS, AT&T) and broadcasters.

The emergence of the cord-cutting phenomenon can be seen as symptomatic of a larger redefinition of television’s every facet: as a techno-cultural form, an institution, an industry, a programming practice and audience practice. Indeed, in the past two decades, while on one side, transnationalization trends and the spate of neo-liberal efforts to deregulate and liberalize the market allowed new competitors to enter the production and distribution stage of the television

⁴ Ziggo is the largest cable operator in The Netherlands that provides digital and analog cable television services, broadband Internet and telephone services to private clients as well as to commercial and public ones. The company resulted from the integration of Multikabel, @Home Network and Casema and it was officially launched in 2008 ([Ziggo](#))

industry; on the other side, processes of media convergence and digitization created a window of opportunity for innovative television services and business models (qtd. in Evans 2011, 44). By lowering entry barriers and guaranteeing global reach, the digital context of television production, distribution and consumption has evolved into a complex and networked system characterized by the emergence of (potentially) disruptive business models and a hypercompetitive environment that multichannel operators can hardly control (Baccarne, Evens and Schuurman 2013, 43). One of the segments of the television industry chain in which these changes are intensively felt is the television distribution system. As Uricchio argues, due to the intensified media convergence and the television medium's own shifts from broadcasting to a variety of alternate carriers - cable, satellite, and video-on-demand systems – content has been loosened from any particular distribution form, thereby giving the Internet access to once-exclusive televisual domains (2004, 175). While less than one decade ago viewers perceived television as something coming through cable rather than the ether, and they were using DVRs and DVDs to pursue their own viewing habits (Uricchio 2009, 31), today viewers access television content through the Internet using multimedia delivery technologies and cross-media screens (Newmann and Levine 2012, 130). Such television content, removed from the structure of television's schedule flow, calls our attention to its embedding in a new, digital media context: instead of flow, here we have an interface, hyperlinks, and a database structure experienced via broadband rather than broadcasting (Bennett and Strange 2011, 1).

As a consequence of the aforementioned developments, the oligopolistic playground of today's cable companies is being challenged by the increasing popularity of television accessed by millions of consumers via Internet services and mobile devices. Although delivery platforms and technologies for online viewing may be relatively new, their effects on social dynamics of cultural consumption historically sit within longer-terms processes that characterize the “changing viewer interface with the television medium” (Uricchio 2004, 164). Moreover, transformations in content access and viewer interfaces should be seen in a wider framework of political, economic, social and cultural developments. Indeed, such changes do not simply provide different degrees of agency to the viewers, but they also produce a series of fundamental shifts in the dimension of power and control in the viewing experience (Chamberlain 2011; Uricchio 2004), which in turn, reflect larger developments in the political economic dynamics between the various actors involved in the television distribution industry. It is exactly the interest in such political economic interplay between the industry and the cutters that prompted my research.

1.2. The Question of the Cord-Cutting Counterpublic

The cord-cutters' question is contemporary and relevant, and it sits within the larger issues of the radical redefinition of television as an institution, as an industry, as a programming practice, and as techno-cultural form. What makes the cord-cutters interesting, however, is the extent to which they help us understand these radical changes from an 'outsider' perspective, showing insights that studies, dominant discourses and usual way of framing the question might miss. In my thesis, I will present an analysis of the dominant discourses around the cord-cutting phenomenon, interpreting it as a burgeoning counterpublic. By counterpublic I primarily refer to the works of critical and feminist theorist Nancy Fraser, and of social theorist and critic Michael Warner. In particular, in his "Publics and Counterpublics" Warner revisits Fraser's notion of 'subaltern counterpublics' (1992) detailing its characteristics and features. Counterpublics are defined as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional, or at least alternative, interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1992, 123). Thus, I would argue that cord-cutters can be interpreted as a generational counterpublic emerged in opposition, or at least providing an alternative to the dominant corporate media systems of information and entertainment. Their behaviours often morph outside the institutional and legal forms of the television system, but from this very same 'leakage' we could gain a better understanding of the contemporary redefinition of television to which the cutters are somehow contributing. In this sense, we can suggest that the cord-cutting counterpublic has a symbolic power (Bourdieu 1990; Couldry 2003; Couldry and Curran 2003; Thompson 1995; Uricchio 2006) that is shaping the way we socially and culturally experience television, and influencing - as well as being influenced by - the practices and strategies of the television distribution system. Indeed, the cord-cutters are under increasing scrutiny by the industry, almost disproportionately compared to their marginal numerical status, therefore placing them in a position to discursively shape, or at least play a role in shaping the future of the television medium.

The cord-cutting counterpublic is a marginal but growing reality that has particularly attracted attention in the United States where its political and economic effects on the industry practices are increasingly felt. However, despite the significance of the U.S. situation, one of the fundamental aspects of this type of audience is its transnational and cross-border character. Actually, cord-cutters emerge in the midst of processes of transnational media convergence, intended as "convergence within media forms, across media forms and across national boundaries" (Uricchio 2006, 68). In particular, they lie at the intersection of two opposite but complementary trends: on one side the ever-greater convergence and concentration which is leading to an

increasingly centralized and hierarchized state of media ownership; and on the other side, the rapid spread of Internet-based media networks which are by definition de-centralized, de-territorialized and de-hierarchized (Uricchio 2006, 68). In today's convergent television industry, such processes are particularly evident in the distribution-to-consumer ecosystem i.e. the entire chain of distribution intermediaries from the supplier to the consumer. This ecosystem is a complex environment that is witnessing the clashing of worlds once disconnected: the telecommunication industry; television, in the sense of media programmers and broadcasters; and the Internet industry (Sanjoy 2011, 4). Although broadcasting history already experienced past moments of intersection between these systems, with today's digital convergence processes more actors came into play.⁵ Moreover, the increasing use of IP data transmission, combined with significant broadband penetration, increases in bandwidth and the proliferation of digital devices, have all enabled different services to use the same networks, and have facilitated the ability of the television industry to offer new and bundled services (OECD 2013, 5). Therefore nowadays, the already tight level of interconnectivity and cross-ownership between telephone, television and Internet companies is getting even tighter, especially in the television distribution system.

For the scope of my research, I will primarily focus on the dynamics of the last segment of the television distribution chain, more specifically, on the established content distribution platforms, also referred as 'pipelines,' such as cable, satellite, and broadband providers. In a second instance, the discussion also touches upon the emerging Internet and OTT service aggregators, like Netflix, Hulu, Popcorn Time, YouTube or Amazon Instant Video, that are now offering alternatives ways of distributing television content. The reasoning behind this choice is two-fold. Firstly, the question of the cutters is particularly relevant in this sector, and the analysis of the interplay between this part of the television distribution industry and the proactive cord-cutters can reveal interesting insights on the overall power interplay. Secondly, contrary to what Henry Jenkins said, I would argue that media delivery systems are not "simply and only technologies" (2006, 14), but they are technological forms with a certain agency, as Bruno Latour would say (2005), and a relative symbolic power with social, cultural, political and economic impacts. Such networks of distribution combined with the spreading of Internet, new digital technologies and televisual interfaces, have offered "those on the margins effective ways of circumventing and even undermining top-down concentrated television industries" (Uricchio 2006, 65). The cutters are indeed some of 'those people on the margins'. Thus, in the wake of Uricchio's work on *Media Cultures*, we can argue that while the example of contestation of institutional media power given by the cord-cutting

⁵ For an insightful analysis of the past moment of interrelations between broadcasting and telephone companies see Michele Hilmes's *Hollywood and Broadcasting: from Radio to Cable*, especially chapter 2 and 3.

phenomenon might seem marginal and limited to the activities of a minority, in fact their stakes for how we redefine television may be profound (Uricchio 2006, 65).

With the above considerations in mind, my research has two main goals. Firstly to conceptualize the cord-cutters as a burgeoning counterpublic that is symptomatic of a larger redefinition of television. Secondly, to explore how its symbolic power is influencing the power interplay in today's television networks of distribution. These goals respectively reflect the following research questions: firstly, *how can we culturally define the marginal but growing phenomenon of the cord-cutting and what are its drivers and characteristics?* Secondly, *how is this phenomenon mutually shaped by the viewers' practices as well as the industry's responses, and how does its symbolic power affect the power interplay of the contemporary television distribution platforms?*

Although cord-cutters constitute a transnational phenomenon that is spreading across the world, due to the scale of my research, I will draw the attention on the United States situation. The focus on the specific U.S. situation is necessary firstly because “ ‘What is television?’ very much depends on where you are” (Turner and Tay 2009, 8). Secondly, my interest shifted towards the U.S. situation since the media industries have long been powerful political players in the U.S. and there is a multi-layered political economic interplay between broadcasters, Internet-based companies and established cable companies that, as recent events have showed us, the symbolic power of the cord-cutting counterpublic is influencing.⁶ Finally, my decision was also made on the basis of the availability of data, sources and previous studies on the cord-cutting phenomenon that are mainly focused on the U.S. situation. Therefore, while my question has a broader scope, given the focus of my analysis I can only speculate on the specific U.S. situation as the basis of my research.

The analysis of these dynamics of resistance and resilience could be drawn from different points of view, however, in my thesis I will take the cord-cutters' perspective, using it as a point of reference to gain insights on the redefinition of television exactly from those who are standing 'at the margins' of it. In other words, my research takes an audience perspective, exploring the dominant discourses around the question of the cutters, investigating why these particular viewers are seeking new alternatives, and how in response the industry is answering to such changes. Thus the final goal is to show that the cutters represent a force creating change and new paradigms, a

⁶ The recent events hereby mentioned will be further discussed throughout the thesis. In general though, I am referring to the corporate struggle between cable companies and broadcasters in the United States, which involved some of the biggest cable companies, like Comcast and Time Warner Cable, as well as broadcasters and popular OTT service aggregator like Netflix. These companies are toughening the competition in the television distribution industry via strategic partnerships and acquisitions aimed at recapturing the growing number of viewers that are 'cutting the cable cord' and seeking for new online alternatives.

counterpublic which is being carefully watched and listened to by the television industry as well as by the growing innovative businesses of online television, since it discloses a possibly disruptive vision of the future of television.

1.3. Methodology: Sources, Approach and Structure

In my thesis, I will use a political economic approach in order to explore the dynamics between the cord-cutters and the television distribution platforms in the United States, and the implication of this power interplay for the future of television. Such method will be integrated with a cultural and historical backdrop that will allow me to properly frame the question of the cord-cutting. As media and cultural studies professor Michele Hilmes suggested, drawing on a model of historical narrative that focuses on processes rather than outcomes, on conflicts and tensions rather than consensus, the analysis of forces that present alternatives or opposition to the dominant ones can enrich our understanding of the larger patterns and structures (1999, 5). I assume this to be the case also for the investigation of the cord-cutters, and that this can help us in understanding the larger shifts in television from the perspective of these proactive viewers. Moreover, by regarding political, economic and industry dynamics as inseparable components of their cultural and social contexts, a greater depth of understanding can be brought both to the interpretation and analysis of the questions of the cutters, and to the study of their developments. Thus, to search and select the necessary material for my thesis I have followed Hilmes' advice that recommends going back to primary materials – government records, trade periodicals, and industry publications – and in some cases to discover and reinterpret secondary materials that are usually overlooked, such as popular press (1999, 5).

This line of reasoning is in alignment with the work of media scholars Eileen Meehan, Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko, who consider those sources highly important for a political economic analysis of a media phenomenon. According to these scholars, data and information should be gathered from direct involvement via personal interviews and other primary documentation, and combined with trade publications and popular press (Meehan, Mosco and Wasko 1993, 113). However, it should be noted that “access to the crucial materials remains one of the most onerous constraints on research” (Meehan, Mosco and Wasko 1993, 113), and it constituted a major limitation for my work as well. For instance, I was not able to freely access certain industry reports, neither to have direct access company databases, nor to interview significant players of the market. Bearing these considerations in mind, I have based my thesis on four main types of sources: scholarly works; trade press; popular press; and the ‘voices’ of the

cutters as found in websites, social networks, online forums or blogs. These sources reflect the four principal constituencies that are engaged with the cord-cutting phenomenon, which are respectively academics and researchers, media professionals and the television industry, media regulators, and the cord-cutters themselves. Even if such ‘voices’ are not always easily distinguishable, by combining them I will present a fuller picture of the discursively contested audience of the cutters. With this choice I also assume that privileging the periods’ own discursive constructions of audiences (Uricchio and Pearson 1994, 1) is crucial for analysing the peculiar audience of the cutters. In fact, assuming that the “real” audience of the cutters is difficult to grasp, such perceptions can contribute to my conceptualization of the cord-cutting counterpublic. As a final consideration, these sources differ in terms of representativeness but also credibility and objectivity, therefore we should be aware of how they mediate data and information.

The political economy approach used in this thesis is primarily based on the works of Eileen Meehan, Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko. In “Rethinking Political Economy”, these scholars broaden classical political economy theories by considering four essential dimensions: “history, the social totality, moral philosophy and praxis” (Meehan, Mosco and Wasko 1993, 107). This grounding of political economy analysis orients researchers to the study of social change through economic restructuring with the purpose of investigating and explaining structural continuity and change (1993, 112). Moreover, as also Peter Golding and Graham Murdock show, political economy approaches are particularly suitable to understand media industries since they are on one side holistic, in the sense that they explore economic issues in relation to the political, social and cultural life; and on the other side, they are also historical, paying close attention to long-term changes in the role of state, corporations and the media in culture (1991, 72-73). Thus, using this perspective, I will discuss the dynamics of resistance and resilience that are taking place between the cord-cutting counterpublic and the television distribution platforms. I believe that a political economic approach is suitable to tackle such issues since the activities of a marginal and limited minority like the cutters are having profound effects on the redefinition of television as an institution, as an industry, as a programming practice, and as techno-cultural form. In other words, the cutters are emerging as a counterpublic whose symbolic power is not simply redefining those behaviours formerly known as ‘TV watching’, but they are also entering - and altering - the growing corporate struggle between the new and the incumbent delivery platforms.

With this methodology in tow, this thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part is dedicated to the theoretical and conceptual grounding aimed at critically engaging with the question of cord-cutting from a cultural perspective. Thus, to answer the question of *how can we culturally define the marginal but growing phenomenon of the cord-cutting and what are its drivers and*

characteristics, I will provide a backdrop based on audience reception theory with a particular focus on media resistant behaviours and audience emancipation (Livingstone 1991-2004; Sholle 1991). The purpose is to frame the cord-cutters as proactive viewers who are attempting to resist and circumvent the institutional and legal forms of the television distribution industry. Moreover, I will situate this phenomenon within the broader framework of the so-called “post-television” era (Levine 2011; Lotz 2007; Strangelove 2015) and its shifts in audience reception as well as industry practices. Given this historical and cultural framework, I will then conceptualize the cutters as a burgeoning counterpublic, exploring the characteristics of this audience practice that are emerging in opposition, or at least as an alternative to the dominant ones. This discussion will be integrated and supported by an analysis of data and statistics concerning the U.S cord-cutters phenomenon, and in particular on its demographic connotations, the television consumption modes, and the use of delivery platforms and OTT service aggregators. Such data are mainly collected from Nielsen, OECD database, the OECD’s “Communications Outlook 2013”; and market research reports published by media consultancy companies like IDATE⁷ or television companies like Netflix.

The second part will draw the attention on the U.S cutters’ situation linking it to the dynamics of resistance and resilience between the cutters and the television distribution industry. This analysis attempts to answer to the second research question of *how is the cord-cutting counterpublic mutually shaped by the viewers’ practices as well as the industry’s responses, and how does its symbolic power affect the power interplay of the contemporary television distribution platforms?* To do so, I decided to explore the main motives and rationales that are prompting these active viewers and the relative responses of the television distribution platforms. More specifically, through a discourse analysis of the aforementioned primary constituencies, I have identified four main categories of motives of this counterpublic, to which I have matched the strategies implemented by the industry. Not every motive has a mirrored response, however the aim is to explore how they connect and interact in order to investigate the interplay between the resistance movement of the cutters and the resilience of the established television system. In other words, why are certain viewers opting out, and what new alternatives are they seeking? In response then, how is the industry trying to answer their needs and recapture them in their networks? Both these questions are playing out against and enabled by a backdrop of rapidly changing technological possibilities.

With this general structure in mind, the second chapter will present a review of the historical, cultural and technological processes behind the cord-cutting phenomenon. More specifically, I will briefly review the on-going redefinition of television in today’s convergent era,

⁷ IDATE has been recognized as a reliable resource for tracking telecom, Internet and media markets. The company has founded an institute, under the name of DigiWorld which is specialized in media market research, consultancy and analysis from which users can gather fruitful insights on the functioning of media industry and practice (IDATE)

exploring how the U.S. television distribution system has been revolutionized by the clashing and converging of worlds once disconnected: the telecommunication, the television and the Internet industry. This discussion will be framed in a historical narrative that takes into account similar precedent patterns that have marked the history of broadcasting and its interrelation with the telephone companies.⁸ This allows me to show the structural change as well as the structural continuity (Meehan, Mosco and Wasko 1993, 112) of the ‘post-television’ era where television is transforming into a ‘transmedia medium’, and where it is being unbundled from the medium that delivers it and the technology we watch it on. Given these premises, I will then focus on the cord-cutting phenomenon by reviewing how the perceptions of the four main aforementioned constituencies frame the cutters’ reality. Finally, I will position myself within these dominant discourses conceptualizing the cutters as a generational and marginal phenomenon that is rapidly emerging as a transnational counterpublic. Moreover, I will argue that this counterpublic seems to have a ‘symbolic power’ (Couldry 2003) that is both shaping the way we socially and culturally experience television, and influencing the industry practices.

Given this theoretical groundwork, in the third chapter I will then explore the interplay between the cutters and the television distribution platforms. In particular, the sub-chapter 3.1 is dedicated to the analysis of the drivers and rationales of the cord-cutters, while 3.2 discusses the relative responses and strategies implemented by the industry. With regard to the motives of the cutters, it appears that the cord-cutting phenomenon is driven by a host of factors, from personal ideologies, to dissatisfaction with commercial television programming, rising cable subscription costs, or spreading of innovative delivery technologies and televisual interfaces. Within this ensemble, I have used discourse analysis to identify four main categories of rationales, which can be described as: ‘desire to be freed from any constraints’, ‘moral superiority complex’, ‘desire for multimedia and cross-platforms television services’ and ‘increased online social connection and participation’ These drivers lead certain viewers to opt out the old television system, circumvent its institutional and legal forms and look for online alternatives and innovative OTT services. In response to this ‘leakage’ the industry’s empire strikes back. In order to connect these ‘outsider’ behaviours with ‘insider’ reactions, I have grouped the various responses derived from the television distribution system in three principal categories that roughly correspond to the main rationales of the aforementioned sub-groups. The categories identified are the following: ‘circumventing the cutters’; ‘cross-platform distribution in a connected viewing system’; ‘cross-media audience engagement.’ As I previously said, my focus is not on the entire distribution

⁸ The analysis of such past moment of interrelations between broadcasting and telephone companies will be based on television history works such as Michele Hilmes’s *Hollywood and Broadcasting: from Radio to Cable*.

system, but I will direct attention primarily to the television content delivery platforms. Moreover, it should be noted there is no clear cut correspondence between each rational and industry response; on the contrary, a mismatch is most likely to appear in certain cases. Nevertheless, my purpose is to explore how they interact in order to investigate the interplay between the resistance movement of the cutters and the resilience of the established television distribution platforms. The categorization hereby presented is heuristic and functional, and necessarily simplifies complex and multifaceted dynamics. It therefore inevitably limits my research, since the issues discussed are part of macro-dynamics that not only involve the whole distribution chain and the television system in general, but go beyond it since there are wider political, social and economic interests at stake in this power interplay.

Finally, chapter four will present a comprehensive and concluding discussion of ‘who is disrupting whom?’ reflecting on findings and concluding remarks in relation to we have learnt about the cord-cutting counterpublic, its techno-cultural specificities and the power interplay within an ever-greater convergent and networked television distribution system. Critics often prophetically announce that the Internet is disrupting “the medium once known as television” (Uricchio 2009). However, I would argue that from the dynamics of resistance and resilience between cutters and the television distribution industry, a mutually transforming effect is emerging and we could almost argue that in certain cases is television that is disrupting the Internet (Wolff 2014). In concluding this final chapter, I will also include a critical discussion of the limits of my thesis and the future possibilities for further research.

1.4. Relevance

From an academic point of view, this work attempts to shed light on a still-unfolding topic that has received much attention in the popular and trade press, but still remains underexplored by scholars. Indeed, despite its numerically marginal status, the cord-cutting phenomenon has caught the attention of media professionals, journalists, regulators, and television consumers in general; but within academia, it is still beneath the radar. In particular, whereas scholars have primarily focused on the economic implications of these changing audience reception practices, investigating the potentially disruptive effects of online audiences for the established television industry practice and structures, the cord-cutting phenomenon is lacking a theoretical and cultural framework. Such groundwork is crucial for understanding the changes that the cord-cutters are bringing to today’s social and cultural construction of television. These shifts indeed are challenging both industry and academia alike “to grapple with long-held truism about the medium as a business, techno-cultural

forma, and cultural object” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 4). Moreover, as lecturer in Communication Studies Michael Strangelove argues, in general “there is over half a century’s worth of studies that explore the values and attitudes of the television audience, but very little has been written about those of the cord cutters, cord nevers, television pirates and other member of television’s scariest generation” (2015, 107). Thus, my work is dealing with a largely unexplored topic of crucial importance for the current television ecosystem as well as for its future reconfiguration. In conclusion, with my thesis, I attempt to socially and culturally frame the audience practices of these peculiar television viewers, and to relate their behaviours to broader political economic dynamics of the television distribution platforms, and in general to the redefinition of the medium.

The Cutters in a Cross-Media Television Ecosystem

As noted, this first part of my work seeks socially and culturally to frame the cable cord-cutters as a burgeoning counterpublic that is symptomatic of a larger redefinition of every aspect of television. In particular, this discussion aims to answer my first research question: *how can we culturally define the marginal but growing phenomenon of the cord-cutting, and what are its characteristics and motivational drivers?* Before diving into the topic of the cord-cutting phenomenon though, in the first two paragraphs I will present an overview of the historical, cultural and technological processes behind it, reviewing the on-going redefinition of television in today's digital convergent era where the telecommunication, the television and the Internet industry are undergoing an ever-greater integration. Given these premises, in the third paragraph I will tackle the question of the cord-cutter, discussing this phenomenon through discourse analysis of the discursive constructions of this audience given by four main constituencies related to it i.e. the cord-cutters themselves, media professionals and the television industry, media regulators, and academics and researchers. In conclusion, I will position my work within these dominant discourses conceptualizing the cord-cutters as a generational and marginal phenomenon that is rapidly emerging as a transnational counterpublic, with an apparent symbolic power (Couldry 2003) that places the cutters in a position to play a role in discursively shaping the future of the television medium.

2.1. Re-working of the U.S. Television Distribution Platforms

At the end of her account of American television revolution, Communication Studies scholar Amanda D. Lotz provides useful insights on the cultural and social shifts that have developed around the new technologies of production, delivery and consumption of television in the so-called digital era (2007). In particular, since the early 2000s in the United States television has entered the so-called "post-network" and "post-broadcasting era" (Lotz 2007, 7). The term "post-network" is used by Lotz to indicate comprehensive changes in the television medium's uses and practices that

took place as a development of the “multi-channel transition” (Lotz 2007, 7). Throughout this period, every facet of television was revolutionized. As an industry, it underwent the breaking open of the distribution bottleneck, by which I refer to the stranglehold that stations and cable operators had in the television business (Todreas 1999, 9); in other words, the network structure on which the U.S. system of broadcasting was built upon and profited by controlling access in most markets (Hilmes 2004, 333). The disruption of the distribution bottleneck opened up the market to new players, and it allowed nearly limitless possibilities for viewers to access programming when and where they wanted (Lotz 2007, 15). These shifts in industry and audience practices, combined with the on-going changes in ‘viewer-medium interfaces’ (Uricchio 2004), enhanced the time- and place-shifting possibilities of the viewers, and at the same time, they redefined the techno-cultural form of television. Finally, programming practices evolved alongside these developments, leading to what Brooker described as television content’s ‘overflow’ (Brooker 2003) onto multimedia and cross-media platforms.

Without reducing the relevance of these phenomena, we should notice though that things have further changed since Lotz’s theorization of the post-network era. Today, whereas there is certainly a dominant view that foregrounds the “death of network broadcasting”, in Anglo-American Media and Cultural Studies it has become something of an orthodoxy to see the current formations of television as enmeshed within processes that have the medium moving from regulation to deregulation, from a mix of public and private ownership to overwhelming commercialization, and from broadcast and cable into broadband (Turner 2011, 32). Concerning the latter point, we see that the growth of the Internet and the spreading of broadband connections led to profound transformations of television’s distribution and transmission (Hilmes 2013, 16). Indeed, fundamental changes affecting traditional broadcasting stem from a further disaggregation of content from the networks, and its availability via the Internet. This disaggregation combined with significant broadband penetration, increases in bandwidth and the proliferation of digital devices, has enhanced the much-vaunted processes of digital media (OECD 2013, 5). Within this scenario, several innovative delivery platforms entered the television distribution system, including analogue or digital terrestrial broadcasts, satellite, cable, Internet Protocol (IP) and OTT services (OECD 2013, 5). Thus, as television goes digital, transforming into a cross-media techno-cultural form, “its full convergence with the computer-based internet remains only a matter of time” (Hilmes 2013, 19).

There is a certain element of technological determinism involved in the emergence of the Internet and digital media as platforms for television content, and the way in which online and mobile televisual services have evolved, indicating “how those technological developments meet

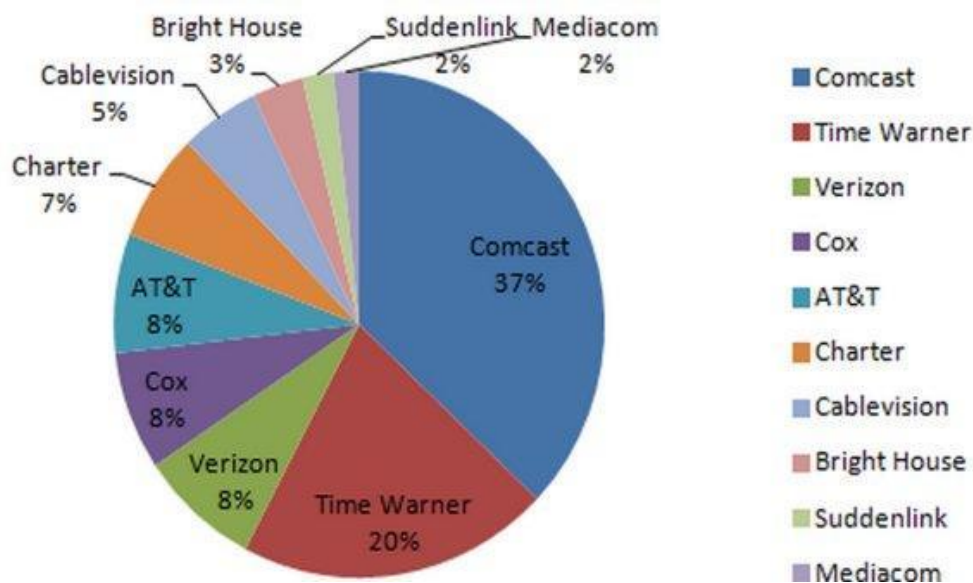
both with existing industrial structures, and the desires of the audiences” (Evans 2011, 43). However, this current redefinition of television is blurring the boundaries between the various media, and for certain scholars what has been described as ‘digital transmedia television’ is not even television anymore. In other words, television has been relocated in a ‘post-TV world’ (Lury 2008) where “there is no one ‘thing’ we can call television” (Levine 2011, 177), but multiple “televisions” (Lotz 2007, 78), that are redefining the notion of this medium as a cross-media techno-cultural form. While, the broader climate of ‘post-television’ (see Gripsrud 2010; Levine 2011; Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 2008; Strangelove 2015) has to do primarily with the study and teaching of television (Levine 2011, 180), similar logics can be found amongst the industry practices. In fact, various television businesses tend to unbundle the traditional concept of TV from the television medium and its delivery means, implicitly emphasizing this idea of a ‘post-TV world’ through their marketing and advertising strategies. An example can be found in HBO’s branding strategies of its new online and cross-media “*TV Everywhere*” service that has been marketed as “not TV,” but “HBO.”⁹ Another way of saying, “TV is dead, but long live television!” (Frost 2014)

Within this ‘post-TV world’, the television industry segment most altered by such processes is the distribution system. In particular, the cross-media digital distribution of content has been prompted by the convergence and clashing of worlds once disconnected: the telecommunication industry; the television industry, in the sense of media programmers and broadcasters; and the Internet (Sanjoy 2011, 4). Besides the important and specific novelties of today’s convergence processes, broadcasting history has already experienced past moments of intersection between these three systems. In particular, similar patterns can be traced back to the 1930s, when in the United States radio and television broadcasting were closely linked to the telecommunication industry, especially with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T). In fact, AT&T’s landline connections often played a decisive role in the reconfiguration of the industry structure and economics (Hilmes 1999, 17). The monopoly possesses over the long-distance land lines necessary for the formation of broadcast networks allowed the AT&T to control the wires that linked local broadcasting stations to consumers, giving the company a huge power leverage used “to exert a restraining function in the broadcast business” (Hilmes 1999, 18).

⁹ “*TV Everywhere*” is the label given to the phenomenon of horizontal integration, content aggregations, and the offline/online bundling strategies of multi-channel video programming distributors and Internet service providers (Waterman, Sherman, and Wook Ji 3). I will further discuss this concept and the relative business strategies in the third chapter, paragraph 3.2.3. Moreover, the logo “It’s not TV, it’s HBO” echoes a long-term HBO marketing campaign that tends to emphasize the unicity of the HBO television service compared to the rest of the U.S. broadcasting, for instance they ran programming by subscription, without ads, allowing ‘four-letter words’ and sexual depiction. This ‘is not TV, it’s HBO!’ However, even though the logo echoes this longer campaign, associating it also with the *TV Everywhere* service pushes the notion of television in a new context, differentiating it from the traditional conception of ‘TV.’

As the case of AT&T in the 1930s shows, today’s telecommunication and Internet ‘pipelines’ are crucially important for the political economic dynamics of the television distribution industry, since “who controls the tools often determines the nature of the system put in place” (D’Agostino and Tafler 1994, xvii). In particular, nowadays, the oligopolistic playground of cable companies is being challenged by the increasing popularity of television accessed via Internet and OTT service aggregators, which are breaking through the established distribution bottleneck, and influencing the power interplay between the incumbent institutional and technological players. For decades, the U.S. market of cable television providers has basically been an oligopoly dominated by few major companies, firstly Comcast, that at the time of writing has roughly 40% of the market share with its 33 million subscribers (Edwards 2014), followed by the second largest cable TV provider Time Warner Cable with 20%, and three others main players with roughly the same amount of subscribers, respectively AT&T, Verizon and Cox Communications (see fig. 2.1). This oligopolistic playground is now facing a restructuring; in particular, on one side we are witnessing aggregation processes at a structural level, since the same cable TV companies are rapidly shifting to the Internet cable, providing both services in order to maximize their profit as audiences and advertisers shift increasingly to online. On the other side instead, the television distribution system is undergoing content disaggregation processes since various pieces of television content are slipping from one system to the other, creating a cross-media ‘overflow’ (Brooker 2003).

Fig. 2.1 The pie chart below shows the configuration of the cable TV industry in the United States in 2014 (Short 2014)

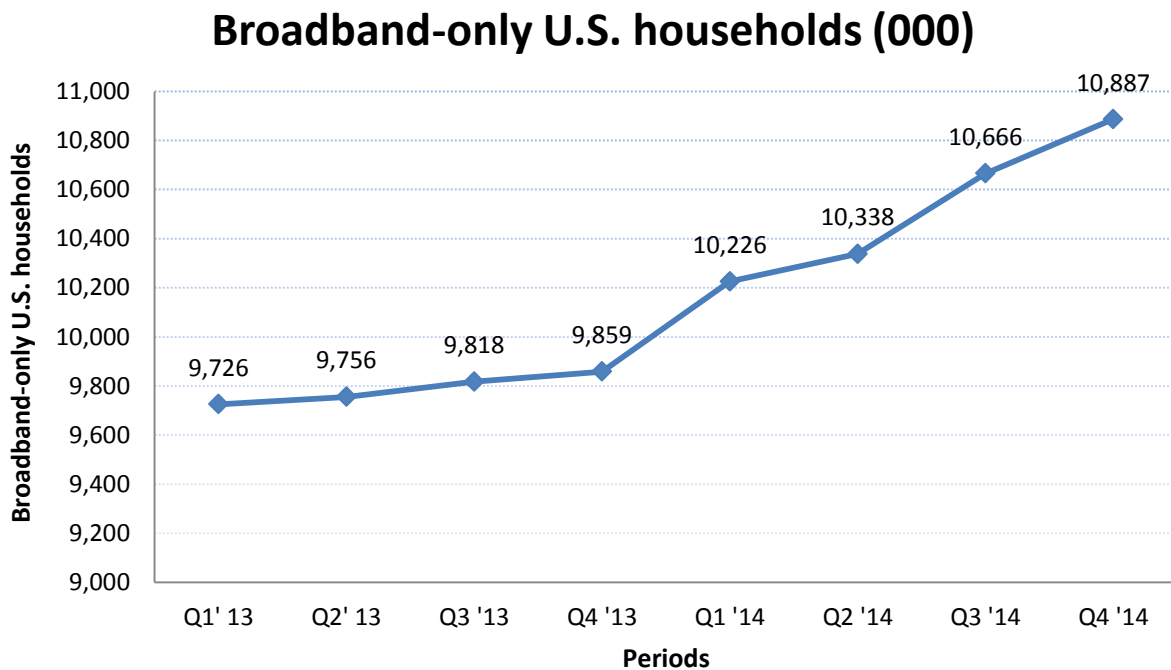


The ongoing reconfiguration of today's industry structure and practice has been prompted not only by the techno-economic convergence of broadcasters, telecommunication and Internet companies, but also by the audience reception practices (Evans 2011, 43). As film and media scholar Michael Curtin observed, the industrial changes of the early twenty-first century "have been motivated in part by new competitors and new technologies, but just as important, they are spurred by the changing behaviours of audiences" (2011, 19). Indeed, long before the broadcasters began to change their businesses, audiences already initiated cross-media engagement and distribution practices via "guerrilla networks" (Evans 2011, 44). By this, Evans refers to those fan-based activities that allowed the proliferation of file-sharing and more or less "unofficial distribution networks of audiovisual materials," before the industry started to engage in multimedia and cross-platform distribution strategies (2011, 44). Indeed, already in the early 2000s a number of peer-to-peer file-sharing websites emerged - from BitTorrent and Pirate Bay, to Kazaa or YouTube - and fringe viewers started to stream and download television content via Internet, instead of aerial cable or satellite dish. Moreover, since the late 1990s the diffusion of new delivery means such as DVDs that allowed viewers to watch television content with no commercial breaks or advertisements, removing any 'pollution' from the text (Jacobs 2011) may have played a role in enhancing the idea of watching what you want, when you want. Indeed, via DVDs some viewers were already growing accustomed to personalizing their television experiences watching content via other routes rather than the traditional broadcast programming. Such changes in audience reception practices and fan-based activities might be seen as precursors of today cord-cutting phenomenon.

Although, these fringe activities have often morphed outside the television industry and its established institutional and legal norms, at the same time, they are also influencing its structural dynamics. In this regard, the effects of the cord-cutting practices have particularly been felt by television distribution platforms. Indeed, the incumbent distributors, such as satellite and cable television operators "risk disintermediation, i.e. the elimination as middlemen in a chain of distribution, if OTT and other access option offer a better value proposition for access to desired content" (Frieden 2011, 6). Actually, even if new distribution options impose pay per view charges, or monthly subscription rates, as in the case of Netflix, consumers might in any case have new, à la carte programming available that provides access to desired content at a much lower price compared to the bundled offers of cable television (Frieden 2011, 6). Thus, U.S. consumers are not turning away from television content, rather, "they leverage new technologies that better fit their changing viewing preferences" (Lenoir 2015, 4). Indeed, according to a *SNL Kagan's* report, since 2013 the U.S. market witnessed a growing number of broadband-only homes (see fig. 2.2), and "it is assumed that this bulk of broadband-only homes fill their video needs with Internet-based video

services, including online aggregators such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. However, a sub-set of households could also receive over-the-air signals” (Lenoir 2015, 3).

Fig. 2.2 This graph shows the growing number of broadband-only U.S. households from 2013 till 2014. The data are based on SNL Kagan’s company reports and SNL Kagan estimates (Lenoir 2015)



Together with the potential loss of consumers, cord-cutting behaviours are influencing the power interplay between incumbent distribution platforms and broadcasters. Indeed, whereas in the past, they were able to raise prices and to pass on the raises by channel providers, this is now becoming more difficult since, as economics and finance professor Eli Noam emphasizes, the ability of channel providers to offer content to viewers considerably reduces the bargaining strength of the cable television operators (Alleman et al. 2013, 15). Furthermore, while bundled services used to be one of the pillars of cable companies’ and broadcasters’ business strategies, now offering only bundled channels or ‘prix fixe’ is more problematic (Alleman et al. 2013, 15). In a nutshell, cable TV is not faring that well, but at the same time the industry’s resilience is strongly emerging. In conclusion, today the real issue in television distribution is broadband, thus if the cable television industry wants to keep up with the changing system, it needs to develop expertise in online delivery technology. Hence, even though “once upon a time, cable was the disruptive technology in the media business [...] the time has come for the cable industry to innovate again” (Shapiro 2012) But, as I will further argue in the third chapter, incumbent distribution platforms like cable television

companies are indeed adapting themselves to the changing environment, leveraging the fact that “those pipes that they put in the ground to deliver television content also could deliver super-fast broadband access” (Shapiro 2012).

2.2. Legitimizing Newfound Viewing Behaviours

Cross-media and online distribution has resulted in an extension of the spaces in which television content is made accessible, and in the possibility of a multimedia televisual experience. The fact that viewers can now access television content on multiple sites, through various technologies, and via different delivery platforms, prompted fundamental changes in audience reception practices (Evans 2011, 63). In particular, we are witnessing an acceleration in the pace of transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting or ‘flexible microcasting’ (Parks 2004), dominated by a viewer-led process, with a ‘pull’-type of delivery, where viewers have more agency in shifting within time- and space. To these developments correspond on one side, shifts in the dimension of power and control on the televisual experience, and on the other, cultural and social changes in the conception of television and the legitimacy of new television viewing behaviours.

However, as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argued, incumbent distribution platforms often “seem uncomfortable with their role as participants in a space where they don’t exercise complete control over the distribution and circulation of their cultural products” (2013, 5). In fact, in today’s convergent television ecosystem, “whereas content is still discernibly ‘television’ [...] the authority of a site or a company to act as television distributor is considerably less discernible” (Evans 2011, 64). Actually, unauthorized and more or less illegal forms of distribution are rapidly proliferating, and quite often in those cases illegality does not lead to cultural or social illegitimacy (Evans 2011, 64). On the contrary, digital piracy and illegal streaming/downloading of television content are becoming common practices, especially for young generations or fringe online audiences like the cord-cutters. Indeed, cord-cutters *in primis*, but potentially almost every viewer, can simply turn on their computer, log on into the Internet and download or stream a program whenever they wish to. They may do so via a broadcaster’s service, like HBO Go; via a third party that is separate from the content’s original source, such as an OTT service aggregator like Netflix, Hulu Plus or Amazon Instant Video; or via illegal file-sharing sites such as Popcorn Time, Putlocker, Alluc.com, or Videoweed.

Such newfound viewing behaviours are not only blurring the social perception of legality and illegality in the context of television, but they also constantly revise and negotiate the cultural and social value of the television medium. A striking example in this sense is the popular series

Game of Thrones (2011). This show has been made accessible via HBO Go, HBO's online service, which since 2014 has become the cord-cutters' 'holy grail' because it allows HBO subscribers access to all of its movies and original programs on demand, and moreover, soon it might be available even without cable (Moynan 2014). Thus, with HBO Go good quality episodes of *Game of Thrones* can be legally streamed or download with and without cable. Nevertheless, this series still remains the most pirated show ever, not only outside the U.S. where fans are almost 'forced' to pirate such shows if they want to watch it when they are aired to keep pace with the fan websites; but *Game of Thrones* is also the most pirated show within the U.S. These activities, especially streaming, not only can be illegal, they also risk exposure to viruses, and often involve poor quality, pop-up ads and other annoyances. Viewers need to navigate between pop-ups, weird sex banners and possible viruses to reach the right link. Nevertheless, viewers "appear willing to tolerate significant difference in the visual and audio quality of service between screens," (Frieden 2011, 4) in exchange for a more mobile and personalized televisual experience. Thus, whether for reasons of money, or time or geo-location limitations, millions of people are adopting these television viewing behaviours, which are in turn increasingly legitimized as common audience reception practices.

These practices have implications beyond the legality of distribution platforms. They are also related to changing viewer-medium interfaces and the larger issues of power and control regarding the televisual experience (Uricchio 2004). Nowadays, viewers expect a customizable television menu that can be delivered to any screen. Actually, in the wake of these developments, the future television screen is imagined as just "glass-panelled display connected to the internet" (Hastings 2015). In this sense, the reconceptualised television screen doesn't simply replace the 'window-to-the-world', rather it repurposes and remediates through multiple-screen 'virtual windows' (Friedberg 243). Screens have become ubiquitous, simultaneously smaller and larger, slimmer and wider, and "a cluster of digital technologies has built on the potential of remote controls and video cassettes to give television viewers means of 'programming' their own experience" (Newman and Levine 2012, 4). Whereas digital technologies increase the viewer's control over their televisual experience, on the other hand though, the changing viewer-medium interfaces combined with applied metadata protocols and filtering technologies, such as search engines or adaptive agent systems (Uricchio 2004, 176), are prompting more complex and fundamental shifts in the dimension of power and control. Indeed, the so-called 'adaptive agent mediations' work through collaborative filter systems, metadata, complex algorithms and software in order to use consumers' information and data to shape their viewing patterns through "Wish Lists", "Preferences", "Suggestions", "Recommendations" (Uricchio 2004, 175-76). Thus, as often as viewers are given a powerful sense of agency, and they are promised the convenience of the

television experience ‘anytime, anywhere,’ they are equally invited to participate in a television environment that has been exquisitely calibrated and scripted (Chamberlain 2011, 240).

The full power of the interactive scripted spaces should be situated in the broader “pattern of economic and cultural changes that has created a techno-spatial-political system in which various entities – corporate, entrepreneurial, political and governmental – can advance their own interests through eager participation of individuals willing to exchange valuable data for specific media experiences” (Chamberlain 250). An example of these techno-spatial-political systems can be seen in the Internet search engines that give users the impression of being empowered and in control of their own choices. Although, the algorithmically curated choices we are given both feedback our earlier behaviour, and they become grist for the mill of third parties whose business model requires harvesting our data. Thus, the legitimization of newfound watching behaviours based on the use of more or less legal online platforms and innovative televisual interfaces does not come without a price. On the one hand, viewers can have highly personalized television experience, on the other hand though, such audience practices help trigger broader dynamics that are way beyond the viewers’ control. In conclusion, these issues raise questions about the value of such changes, and on what newfound audience behaviours and attitudes towards today’s cross-media televisual experiences can tell us about the changing cultural meaning of ‘television’ (Evans 2011, 64).

2.3 Proactive Viewers, Cord-Killers, Digital Pirates: Here Come the Cord-Cutters

The question of the cable cord-cutters emerges in the midst of the aforementioned redefinition of television and television watching behaviours. By ‘cord-cutting’ I refer to the growing albeit still marginal phenomenon that has been developing in the past decade as households disconnect their television content provider and drop pay-TV services. That is, they are cutting their cable television cord, the same way many households previously cut their telephone landlines. In broader terms, cord-cutting behaviour can take three main forms. Firstly, some households snip the cable cord, cancelling their pay-TV subscription and relying solely on online options. Others instead move to lower-cost pay-TV packages that they supplement with OTT service providers such as Netflix, Hulu, Sling TV or Amazon Instant Video (Strangelove 2015, 94). The latter practice is known as cord-shaving or cord-coupling, since on the one hand, the main television cable cord is reduced or ‘shaved’, and on the other hand, the service providers ‘couple,’ or multiply, since viewers use more delivery platforms. Thirdly, between the cutters ranks there are the ‘cord-nevers’, primarily millennials who have never had any cable television subscriptions, but instead have always

accessed television content online, via streaming and/or downloading practices (Banerjee, Rappoport, and Alleman 2014, 19-20). The growing complexity of these taxonomies already suggests how fast this area is evolving into “complex patterns that draw upon traditional distribution channels, various types of mobile and fixed viewing devices, and a growing suite of legitimate and illegitimate online options” (Strangelove 2015, 94).

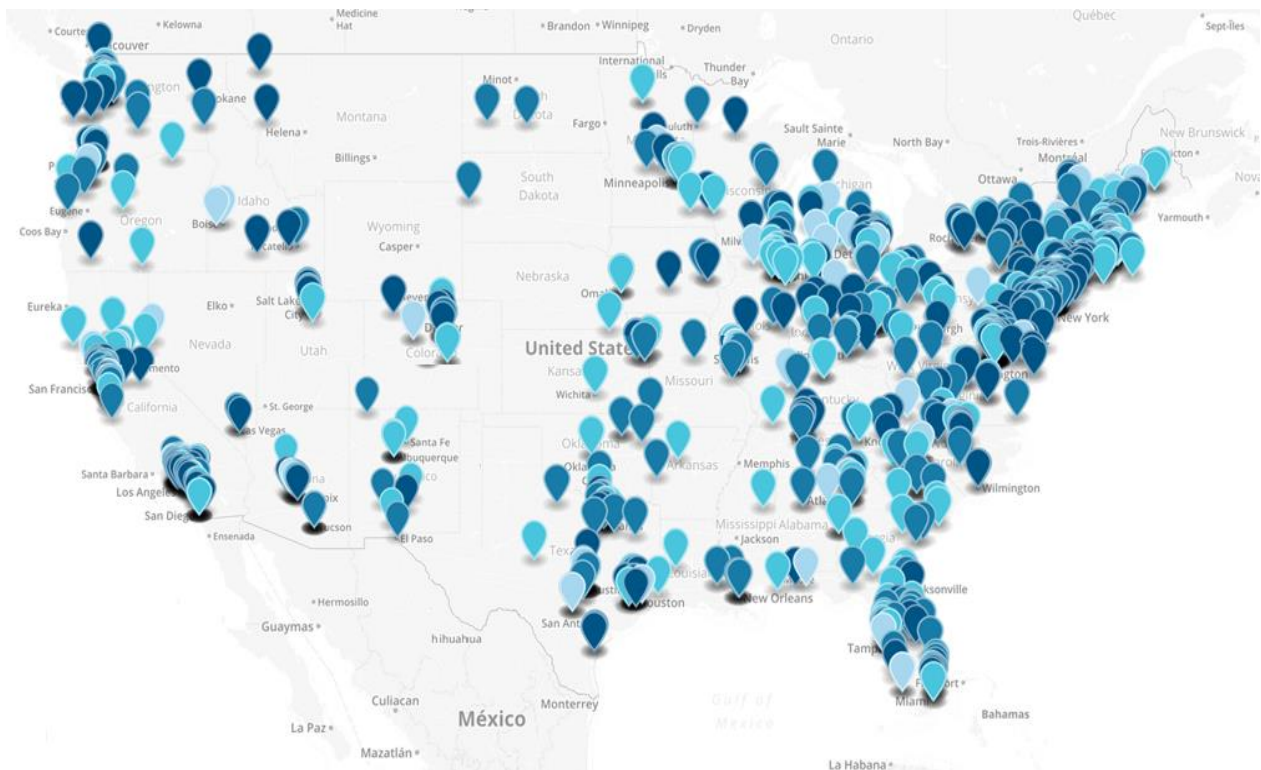
Although cord-cutting behaviours are globally spreading alongside with the technological development of television delivery platforms, this phenomenon is particularly prominent and debated within the United States. Compared to other regions like Europe, the U.S. situation presents certain specificities that accelerated the cord-cutting trend, catching the attention of television industry professionals, media, researchers and regulators. Using Europe as a basis for comparison, we see that while in the European countries competition is intense between television distributors, and it is driving Internet access and television prices down (Alleman et al. 2013, 14); in the U.S. the distribution bottleneck did not allow the same level of competition. On the contrary, due to the oligopoly of cable television providers the cost of bundled services that offer cable TV, broadband and landline telephone have considerably risen in the past years, ranging from 35\$ - usually Internet only - up to 200\$ per month (see fig. 2.3).¹⁰ However, in the U.S. there is also a far more extensive presence of broadband connection and bandwidth reach, whereas in Europe Internet services are far from having the same level, and in addition, there are significant differences from country to country. Thus, the cable price increase combined with the growing numbers of online television platforms inevitably prompted the use of OTT providers as well as the cord-cutting phenomenon.¹¹ In this regard, a recent study from Leichtmann Research Group showed that about 78 % of American households had Internet broadband in 2012 and only about 9 % were not subscribers to any multichannel video service (Alleman et al. 2013, 9). Furthermore, the major transnational OTT service aggregators are almost all U.S.-based companies, thus they serve transnational territories and provide widely variegated catalogues and innovative televisual interfaces. Finally, television industry in the U.S. is commercial in nature, and not insulated by the presence of a legacy state and public role in shaping television’s operations, as tends to be the case in many European nations. The loose relation with the nation state is related also to the presence of a less regulated broadcasting

¹⁰ The costs hereby mentioned are based on a survey done by *The Guardian* in 2015, but Market researchers at NPD Group estimate that the average cable bill, now about \$123 a month, will reach \$200 by 2020 (Mullaney 2015). Indeed, also a study implemented by the Federal Communications Commission found that the price of cable has raised an average of 6.1 percent a year since 1995, compared with general inflation of 2.4 percent a year (Mullaney 2015).

¹¹ A research from Parks Associates finds that 57% of consumers in U.S. broadband households subscribe to an OTT television services, such as Netflix or Hulu Plus, whose content offer is also wider than in other regions (Parks Associates 2015).

market, whereas the free market in broadcast media is a more recent invention in most European countries, coming after the wave of 1980s deregulation.

Fig. 2.3 The image shows a screenshot of the interactive map based on a survey done in 2015 by *The Guardian* which investigates the cable prices around the U.S. including various combination of Internet, cable and landline. The four different shades of blue indicate the four price ranges, from dark blue till light blue the ranges are respectively 0\$ - 50\$; 51\$ - 100\$; 101\$ - 150\$ and 150\$ and over (Kasperkevic and Powell 2015)



Given the aforementioned peculiarities of the U.S. situation, the cord-cutting trend is prominently on the rise there. Indeed, according to “The 2015 Digital Marketer Report” by Experian Marketing Services, 7.3% of all U.S. homes are cord-cutters, up from 4.2% in 2010, and the pace is increasing since in the last year alone, one million more homes joined the cord-cutter ranks bringing the total to 8.6 million households (Experian Marketing Service 2015). Cord-cutting is a fast developing trend in the U.S. and, as *The Financial Times* stated, even media giants like Disney “are grappling with changes in distribution as viewers seek better value for money from their cable and satellite package,” cutting the cord in favour of online alternatives, or choosing

cheaper “skinny bundles” (Garrahan and Platt 2015).¹² Moreover, some analysts claim that, as of August 2015, media shares drastically dropped also because they were “hit by cord-cutting fears” (Garrahan and Platt 2015). Disney reduced growth expectations for its vast cable network division that is anchored by ESPN, one of the strongest channels around; but along with Disney also shares in Comcast, Time Warner, 21st Century Fox, Viacom, CBS and AMC Networks all went down (Steel and Barnes 2015). Even though it is not possible to be established whether there is a direct cause relation or not, it is evident that U.S. the media sector, and in particular the television system, is struggling to absorb the impacts of the shift away from traditional television (Garrahan and Platt 2015). Even, Nielsen’s shift from TV- only metrics to ‘three screens’ metrics represents a tacit acknowledgement of viewing shifting behaviours and the industry’s need to capture them.

With regard to the shift to the ‘three screens’ metrics, we should mention that the cord-cutting phenomenon is tightly related with the increasing preference of viewers to have a multimedia and cross-platform televisual experience based on the combination of traditional television as a first screen, with computer monitors as second, and thirdly wireless smartphones (Frieden 2011, 3). Although I will further explore this correlation in the following chapter, data show that as of November 2014, over 40% of U.S. households had access to an online subscription-based video on-demand (SVOD) service, and 13% boasted multiple streaming services (Nielsen 2014). On average these consumers spend more time watching time-shifted television on a screen other than on the traditional TV set (Steel 2015). Especially younger viewers seem to prefer online and multimedia delivery technologies as they drop traditional broadcast television, whose consumption has decreased between 2011 and 2015 by almost 8-and-a-half hours per week amongst the 18-24-years-olds (Nielsen 2015).

As professor of Telecommunications and Law Rob Frieden argues, within this wide variety of delivery platforms and televisual technologies, cord-cutters usually have three different modes of access to television content online without a cable TV connection but via broadband – that although is often provided by the same companies from which they have cut the cable television cord. Firstly, they can watch television content via illegal and copyright infringing means through efficient peer-to-peer file transfer, or other direct links offered by platforms like Popcorn Time or Alluc.com; as well as “real time streaming of video content files and Internet delivery of live television” (Frieden 2011, 2). Secondly, cutters can use the new and lawful services offered by the emerging online and OTT intermediaries such as Amazon Instant Video, Hulu, Joost, Netflix, and YouTube. Last but not least, a third model of accessing television content online without a cable

¹² The so-called “skinny bundles” are slimmed-down, cheaper packages of channels, that are offered by certain cable and satellite companies, as well as, broadcasters as alternatives to the traditional bundled services. I will further explain this concept in the third chapter.

subscription is offered by certain incumbent broadcasters, broadcast networks, Direct Broadcast Satellite operators, and some of the same cable television operators that are now implementing so-called “*TV Everywhere*” options (Frieden 2011, 2), like Direct TV or Xfinity. These “*TV Everywhere*” services will be further discussed in the third chapter as one of the answer of the television distribution platforms to the cord-cutters’ behaviours.

Moreover, another important characteristic of the cord-cutting phenomenon is that it is clearly generational. Actually, often they are commonly disregarded as penniless students, in fact, just “utter the phrase ‘cord-cutter’ to the average person, and the image of bearded, binge-watching young urbanites instantly will spring to mind” (Zara 2015). However, the full picture of people who are cancelling their cable TV subscription in favour to online OTT providers is a bit more complex. Cable cord-cutting is being driven not just by ‘younger hipsters,’ as the majority of cutters are under 40, educated and employed, often working professionals and university graduates (Strangelove 2015, 99). In particular, it is assumed that a significant percentage of the cord-cutters are between 18 and 24 years old. This young group emerges as the vanguard segment for OTT use, and it is widely considered “responsible for leading developments in voice cord-cutting [...] in fact, interest in, and use of, OTT options is nearly monotonic with age, falling with increasing age of the householder” (Banerjee, Rappoport, and Alleman 2014, 65). Moreover, as previously mentioned, between this group age is also registered the most considerable drop-off in traditional TV viewing, alongside a correspondent increase in time- and space-shifted consumption of television content based on online and multimedia delivery technologies (Nielsen 2015). Although it is difficult to establish whether they are snipping the cord completely or simply shaving it. Finally, amongst the youngest cutters, the cord-nevers are disproportionately millennial.

Besides the general demographic characteristics of the cutters, this peculiar television audience emerges as a discursively contested phenomenon that is affecting industry, academia, and popular culture alike. Moreover, being a current and fast developing phenomenon, it is difficult to grasp as well as to predict. Thus, to socially and culturally frame the cutters, I will now explore the discursive constructions of this audience given by the main constituencies related to it. Indeed, in the wake of Uricchio’s and Pearson’s work on the construction of the nickelodeon audience, I think that discursive conceptions and “perceptions, rather than ‘realities’ ” (1994, 2) can most proximately contribute to my conceptualization of the cord-cutting as a burgeoning counterpublic. After all, perceptions of reality rather than reality itself shape opinions, set policy and are subject to endless debate. With this line of reasoning in tow, the cord-cutting counterpublic as a current discursive entity “serves as a free-floating signifier for the playing out of competing conceptions of the threat/potential” (Uricchio and Pearson 1994, 2) of today’s cross-media television and

newfound watching behaviours. The widespread use of expressions such as “empowered viewers”, “digital pirates”, “cord-killers”, “television’s scariest generation”, suggest already that there is a ubiquitous melodramatic “mode of emplotment” (White 1987) which may reveal but also disguise the construction of the cord-cutters’ audience.¹³ Thus, in the following paragraphs I will discuss the four main discursive formations, and how such more or less distinguishable discourses are playing out in the United States. These conceptions reflect the principal constituencies that are engaged with cord-cutting phenomenon: the cutters themselves, the television industry and media professionals, media regulators, and academics.

The Cord-Cutters’ Discourse

Fundamentally, the cutters portray themselves as empowered television viewers who are circumventing the industry’s constraints in order to disrupt the status quo and to find better alternatives more suitable to their individual interests. The cord-cutters’ discursive conception is composed of two main tropes. On the one hand, this phenomenon is seen almost as a resistance movement made of proactive television viewers who depict themselves as techno-savvy activists, pioneers of the future of television. On the other hand, a less ideological trope interprets the cutters in more realistic and practical terms, picturing them as young viewers who are seeking cheaper and more customizable televisual experiences, because they are fed-up with overpriced and constraining television services.

As Mark Glaser, executive editor of PBS MediaShift, argued during my interview, although the cord-cutting phenomenon now constitutes a real cultural shift, it started as more of a resistance movement (2015). Indeed, the cutters claim that behind the simple snip of the cable cord there is more than the need for new television alternatives: underlying this gesture lays the seeds of revolution against the established television system. To this regard, in 2012 the same Glaser wrote “The Cord-Cutters Manifesto,” in an attempt to give voice to the intentions, motives, and views of the cord-cutting revolution. The opening of this manifesto states:

¹³ The concept of "mode of emplotment," references the work of the historian Hayden White, according to which “any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories” (1987, 44). White further argues that “since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning” (1987, 44). Thus the ‘mode of emplotment’ chosen for constructing and describing a certain phenomenon influences the mode of argument and explanation, as well as, the ideology and opinion which might derive from that.

Dear Cable and Satellite Companies, Hollywood Studios, and the People Who Make TV: the thing is, we love TV. We love the comedy, the drama, the sports, the events, and even sometimes what you call “romantic comedy.” We remember fondly those days growing up as kids when the family sat around in the den watching our favourite shows after dinner. Those were good old days of appointment TV [...] but those days are over. Really. As time marched on, we as viewers gained more power with the ability to record programs, skip commercials and watch things on our time. [...] Listen, cable overlords, you had your chance as monopolists (or duopolists) in so many U.S. markets. Now, we have a choice and can get our TV shows in so many new (Netflix) and old-fashioned (over-the-air broadcast) ways – not to mention all the grey market and borderline illegal ones. (Glaser 2012)

This strong statement was then followed by a “list of grievances” and a “list of demands” in which, with melodramatic and satirical tones, Glaser expresses the complaints and requests of this burgeoning group of viewers whose aim is to challenge the established television industry, disrupt the institutionalized and calcified forms of distribution, and to “give people what they want” (Glaser 2012). To foster such resistance movement, blogs, websites and forums on cord-cutting and for cord-cutters have proliferated online – like “CordKillers”, “ICutCable.com”, “Cutting the cord 2015”, or “Cord Cutters News” and many more. Even an online petition via “Change.org” was initiated against cable companies, which however resulted in failure.¹⁴ These platforms are used to give one other guidance; to share experiences and knowledge; and in general, to broker this marginal but growing community in a way that increases its impact on the television distribution industry. Since the past decade, the more activist part of the cord-cutters have been sharing online guides, diaries of their stories as cutters or video series comments whose topics can range from trashing the incumbent cable companies, to giving suggestions on which are the best and cheapest options to watch television without cable. Given the wide variety of outcomes, it is possible to find more or less formal guides written by common television consumers or technology experts, and few books have been published such as *TechTV’s Cutting the Cord: A Wireless Consumer Guide* by Schwarz, Joyce (2002), or *Your Guide to Cutting the Cord to Cable TV* by Mark Glaser (2013).

The discursive conception constructed by the cutters pictures them as free viewers, “cord-killers” who “have the power to control what they love to watch, whenever and wherever they want, and on every damn device they want to watch it” (CordKillers 2015). The tones might vary from

¹⁴ The online petition initiated by Mark Glaser is based on his cord-cutting Manifesto and it was more or less symbolically addressed to ‘TV and Cable Companies’. However, it did not have enough media reach neither the expected results, actually only 149 people signed it.

source to source but there is a general tendency to over-emphasize the role of the cutters as superior television viewers, pioneers of the television's future and representative of 'television's next generation', that is, the scariest generation for the incumbent distribution platforms (Strangelove 2015, 94). Although, the values and opinions of cord-cutters presented in their own words might be biased and are thus often left aside in scholarly analysis, this vernacular discourse shows us how these viewers are confronting the 'post-TV world' (Lury 2008), how their psychology is changing, and how their behaviours are "diverging from the audience experience of the twentieth century" (Strangelove 2015, 15). In this sense, they more or less consciously shape a new vision of the televisual experience and the television medium itself.

However, besides the much-vaunted spirit of resistance of the most activist side of the cutters, their discursive conceptions reveal a more general feeling of frustration rather than a strong ideology. Thus, as I will later argue, rather than an actual resistance movement, they emerge more as counterpublic constituted of techno-savvy and conscious viewers, fed-up with the institutionalized and calcified television system and willing to cut the cable cord to be freed from what they perceive to be constraining and manipulative industry strategies. We can see them as bearers of a 'silent revolution' (Inglehart 1977), whose cultural, social and political economic impacts are increasingly visible in the contemporary media landscape. Finally, it should be noticed, that not every cutter is consciously taking part in the reshaping of the 'post-TV world' (Lury 2008), on the contrary, many people just cut the cable cord for mere practical and economic reasons, like reducing the cable bill, or customizing and individualizing their own menu of television. Indeed, as I will further discuss in the following chapter, the economic-driven motive clearly appears in every cord-cutting guide, website or blog post, and often it seems to be stronger than the moral superiority complex, or at least it represents one of the first reasons to join what I will define as cord-cutting counterpublic.

The Television Industry's Discourse

Media professionals and television industry executives added their voices to the debate, often casting their own utterances in melodramatic terms equal to those of the cutters' spokesmen. Their mode of emplotment, however, appears discursively contradictory, presenting quite different visions of the cord-cutters over the years. In particular, until the first decade of the 2000s, we witnessed the emergence of a discursive contraposition between deniers and supporters. Later, once the growth of the cord-cutters clearly dismantled the position of the deniers, the modes of emplotment varied according to the more or less hidden business strategies of the television industry spokesmen, and their eventual interest in the cutters' fringe audience. This instability is

partially due to the fact that opinions within the industry are constantly changing, much as the fast evolving developments in viewing behaviours and televisual interfaces.

In 2010 a report by Nielsen announced that cord-cutting was a myth that was exposed by their latest data which proved that the so praised cord-cutting revolution seemed to be ‘purely fiction’ (Nielsen 2010). In 2011, also market analyst Craig Moffett boldly declared that the fear of cord-cutting is fading, however, just a couple of years later he had to mitigate his position reconsidering the development of such newfound viewing behaviours and the actual impacts they have on the redefinition of television (qtd. in Strangelove 2015, 95). Among the deniers there were not only analysts but also broadcasters and media giants. Relevant spokesmen of industry, such as Disney CEO Bob Iger and chief operating officer of 21st Century Fox Chase Carey, made claims concerning the endurance of the traditional cable bundle system against the new practice of streaming and downloading. Also, the party line from cable executives aligned with the deniers’ ranks (Kafka 2010). In fact, as the CFO of Comcast Mike Angelakis boldly stated at the Goldman Sachs Communcacopia XIX conference, “cord-cutting, when consumers drop cable and watch online video, is a myth” (Sherman 2010). Contradictorily though, on the same occasion Angelakis announced that soon the company was going to be “on the offensive” against the cord-cutters and other online audiences, launching its “*TV Everywhere*” plan (Dignan 2010). In response, Verizon CEO Ivan Seidenberg openly emphasized that “cord-cutting is real, and it is a problem” since “young people are pretty smart and they’re not going to pay for something they don’t need to” (Kafka 2010). Thus, besides the official statements of industry executives and media professionals, the industry’s discursive perceptions show that, despite the cord-cutters’ marginal status, this audience is carefully watched by the industry as it is increasingly seen as key component for the future of the television medium.

As Angelakis and Seidenberg’s comments attest, the same big cable and television giants who considered the cord-cutting a myth are now revising their business strategies in order to ‘recapture’ those ‘fringe’ audiences that are increasingly circumventing the established television system (Strangelove 2015, 96-97). A subtler and more precise observation on the nature of this shift from cable TV to broadband has been made by Evan Shapiro, an executive producer and professor of television management. Shapiro claims that the industry is indeed aware of the growing legions of the cutters and the eventual implications for the industry practices, however he says that what is wrong is actually the phrase ‘cord-cutting’, which is remarkably inaccurate (Shapiro 2014). Indeed, Pivot TV’s research shows that “people under 30 would rather have broadband than sex,” but technically speaking, broadband connection still comes through a cable (Shapiro 2014). Thus, describing such audience practices as ‘cord-cutting’ or even ‘cord-killing’ exaggerates the real

situation, portraying it with over-dramatic shades, because in the end, most of the much-vaunted cord-cutters still have cords and often they receive the broadband services through the same companies from which they wanted to be freed.

Alongside the debates amongst deniers or supporters, the various ways in which cutters have been emplotted by the industry often reflect the more or less hidden business strategy of the television industry spokesmen and their interest in the fringe audience made up of cutters. Innovative Internet and OTT providers like Netflix tend to envision the cutters as the future of television, and in this sense they are in alignment with the cutters' conceptualization of their silent revolution. Cutters are almost romanticized as proactive and techno-savvy viewers whose needs and requests can now triumphantly be answered by the new Internet television services. In this regard, the CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings, declared that OTT providers like Netflix, Hulu or Amazon Instant Video are the new frontiers of television, since they are able to provide viewers what they want and when they want it, whereas 'old broadcasters' and linear television cannot (Hasting 2015). These considerations, though, reveal the underlying intent of OTT providers to commodify and capitalize on the cutters' behaviours that bring a new window of opportunity, especially if the current processes of disintermediation further challenge the relationship between incumbent distributors and the emerging 'post-television' audiences. In fact, the television industry may be letting part of its audience slip through its hands, as viewers migrate to more convenient and less expensive online options, but a problem for one industry turns into an opportunity for another (Strangelove 2015, 15).

The discursive conceptions of the cutters are certainly influenced by this changing interplay between the established distribution platforms and the new emerging ones. In particular, while the latter seem to romanticize this audience emphasizing their empowerment and freedom, the former do not share the same positive emplotment. Indeed, these young and techno-savvy elite of viewers is also depicted in more drastic and tragic terms such as 'digital pirates', young and penniless hipsters who cannot afford to pay for bundles of premium TV channels, and who therefore often use illegal ways to circumvent the system. In this sense, cord-cutters are seen as a threat not only to cable TV but also to broadband web providers (Edwards 2013), since, as analysts Moffett and Nathanson dramatically declared, cord-cutting is nailing cable TV and broadband to a "suicidal business model" (Edwards 2013). Moreover, in broader terms cord-cutting is perceived as a threat to the perceived value of television and its status of property (Strangelove 2015, 70), since while the expectations of these viewers are increasingly high, and at the same time, they are likely to pay less and less for good quality television content. In this sense, these rebellious digital pioneers and their content-anywhere attitudes represent "television's scariest generation" (Strangelove 2015, 94), and

they are depicted almost as a virus, “like zombies...they are the UN-cable! And here’s the scary part: they are multiplying!” (Gershon 2011). In conclusion, the industry discourse, while perhaps mundane and easily overlooked, shows us the way the television industry is rationalizing the cord-cutting phenomenon as a profit making enterprise, while working on its social repositioning as a respectable medium. In this regard, in the following chapter I will explore how this rationalization process has evolved in practical responses from the television distribution platforms.

Media Regulators’ Discourse

Media regulators and their spokesmen tightly align with the industry’s discourse regarding the cord-cutters. With the term media regulators I refer primarily to those governmental institutions and political actors involved in the regulation of the U.S. media system, *in primis* the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and its representatives, such as FCC chairman Tom Wheeler, but also the US Supreme Court and Federal Trade Commission (FTC), that are responsible at different levels for arbitrating the media's rights and responsibilities.¹⁵ This discursive conception is subtler and harder to grasp, given the fact that is mainly based on opinions, FCC reports and public speeches. Moreover, the position of media regulators on the question of the cord-cutters is quite delicate since they are not only a major constituency, but they are also primary targets of both the television industry and the cord-cutters themselves.

Despite their numerically marginal status, cord-cutting behaviours are challenging the notion that television practices are powerfully constrained by given conditions of regulatory, institutional and industrial regimes. Actually, the emergence of the cord-cutting phenomenon is symptomatic of broader convergence processes that are radically altering the regulatory context of media and communication systems (Starks 2013, 135). Such disruptive potential was enough to catch the attention of media regulators. In the U.S. in particular, recent developments in the dynamics between online audiences like the cord-cutters and the television industry are being carefully watched by media regulators and policy makers. In fact, these dynamics more or less directly influence the opinions and decision of media regulators, who seem to use the cord-cutters, and online audiences in general, as a site of investigation for producing knowledge and regulatory strategies, which will then be inscribed in a larger regime of political-economic order of the media systems.

¹⁵ The Federal Communication Commission (FCC) is an independent U.S. government agency overseen by Congress that regulates interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories. The commission is the United States' primary authority for communications law, regulation and technological innovation.

Until the beginning of the 2000s, regulators have maintained a relatively neutral position over the clashing and convergence of Internet, telecommunication and the television industry, and the relative effects that these processes had on online audiences like the cord-cutters. This neutral position was bolstered by industry practices that for years tried to maintain that the situation mostly stable, especially because “they didn't want to encourage regulators to step in” (Tribune Wire Reports 2015). However, this started to change around 2005, when YouTube came online, OTT television services like Netflix became increasingly popular amongst viewers, on-demand television content “began hogging bandwidth,” and “evidence surfaced that some providers were manipulating Internet traffic” behind the scenes (Tribune Wire Reports 2015). Given the growing complexity and intertwinement of television and Internet ecosystems, by 2010 the FCC enacted the Open Internet Order with a set of regulations that moved towards the establishment of Net Neutrality. This agency's legal approach, however, was eventually struck down in the courts by the efforts of U.S. cable giants that were against such regulation (Federal Communications Commission 2010).¹⁶ Since the beginning of 2014, the impacts on broadband connections derived from the current re-shaping of the television distribution platforms and changing audience practices could no longer be avoided, and the intervention of media regulators was felt necessary. In particular, the situation heated up when the announced merger between two cable giants, Comcast and Time Warner Cable, exponentially heightened the debate over Net Neutrality and Open Access issues. While I will address this debate more extensively in the following chapter, here we should keep in mind that the interests at stake for citizens, television industry, regulators and cord-cutters alike were huge.

The cord-cutters took active part in the debate, prominently emerging as part of the Internet activists who worked offline and online to protect Net Neutrality against the potentially discriminatory actions of cable companies and internet providers – two actors that often coincide in the U.S. market. Thus, for the first time media regulators had to officially take into consideration the marginal but fast-developing phenomenon of the cord-cutters. In this regard, speaking at the National Association of Broadcasters 2015 Conference, the FCC chairman Tom Wheeler openly addressed the question of cord-cutters, cord-nevers and cord-shavers, emphasizing the common need of regulators, broadcasters, distributors and internet providers to act in accord with changing viewing behaviours (Federal Communication Commission 2015). Moreover, cord-cutters have also received particular attention in the *16th Annual Video Competition Report, the latest FCC's report*

¹⁶ For more information about the Open Internet Order and the relative controversies that emerged around it see *Report And Order In The Matter Of Preserving The Open Internet Broadband Industry Practices* (Federal Communications Commission 2010).

released in 2015, that relates the growth of these viewers to the first-ever subscriber recession for multi-channel video programming distributors (MPVDs).

The discursive conception of the cutters is therefore influenced by the perceived effects that their newfound viewing behaviours and practices are having on the current legal and political frameworks of the television industry. In particular, we see that media regulators have been investigating the cord-cutters, and online audiences in general, to produce knowledge and regulatory strategies that, were in turn translated into a regime of moral and economic order with a transcendent vision of Net Neutrality. In this sense, the construction of the cord-cutting audience whose interests were at stakes in the fight for Net Neutrality permitted the calculation of risk and therefore the possibility of containment of the major shifts that are occurring in the television distribution system that is increasingly moving into the Internet broadband market.

Relying on advisory opinions of policy makers, governmental institutions and their relative spokesmen, the cutters' discursive conception may be shaped, and even exploited, by the positions that these actors take in the debate on Net Neutrality and Open Access issues. However, envisioning the cutters as Internet activists and representatives of the future television generation who should be taken into serious account when formulating the future regulation of television and Internet industry practices, is a double edge sword. Whereas it might be used to endorse further regulation pro Net Neutrality and against the discriminatory practices of the nation's big cable companies, it can also be used to strengthened the idea of the cutters as a new generation of digital pirates whose actions need to be constrained by stricter regulatory regimes.

This controversial conception of a resistance movement of digital pirates devoted to the protection of the Internet, recalls somehow the case of the Swedish Pirate Party: it started out as a grass-root movement around the Pirate Bay, became a BitTorrent tracker for illegal sharing of film and television content, and ended becoming an actual political party that rapidly brokered its popularity up to the European Parliament. Certainly the cord-cutting phenomenon in the U.S. did not solidify into a strong ideology as was the case in Sweden, however both movements initiated as marginal forms of media contestation prompted by audience practices and moved by the idea that to contest media power implies to contest also the way that social and cultural life itself is defined (Uricchio 2006, 65). However, even though the effects of cord-cutting behaviours have implications at a political and regulatory level, the phenomenon is developing in a completely different way, since it is morphing into a broader social and cultural shift rather than an actual activist or political movement.

Academic Discourse

Finally, the cord-cutting phenomenon is increasingly demanding the attention of scholars and researchers as well, even though it remains quite an unexplored topic in academia. As I previously mentioned, the media contestation generated by the cutters may profoundly affect the social and cultural construction of television, and these fundamental changes challenge academia “to grapple with long-held truism about the medium as a business, techno-cultural form, and cultural object” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 4). Whereas in the Social Sciences scholars have been addressing the question of the cord-cutters, especially within Media Economics and Communication Studies (see Alleman et al. 2013; Baccarne, Evens and Schuurman 2013; Banerjee, Rappoport, and Alleman 2014; Hall and Johnson 2014; Frieden 2012-2011; Prince and Greenstein 2013; Strangelove 2015), in the fields of Television and Media Studies – the more culturally inflected approaches to the media - there is still very little research.

To be more accurate though, amongst media scholars the cord-cutting phenomenon has been addressed at least indirectly in relation to other discourses concerning the broader redefinition of television in our digital and convergent era. Thus, the academic discursive conception of the cord-cutters emerges at the intersection of various debates concerning the different facets of the current transformations of television. In particular, we can argue that the question of the cutters lies at the cross-road between discourses on user agency, the shifts in power and control on the television experience, the processes of convergence and connected viewing, the potential disruption of Internet, and the broadband challenge for the established television system, the emergence of over-the-top providers and the growing ranks of online audiences and their relative changing viewers practice. However, the cord-cutting phenomenon and its specificities appear to be always on a subordinate level. Moreover, it has been mainly framed in relation to media economic issues, whereas it has not been sufficiently addressed in broader cultural, social and political economic terms. Actually, being a current and quite unexplored topic, there is no shared theoretical framework, and not even common agreement as how it should be defined, as various terms proliferated to describe the different nuances of this phenomenon, like cord-cutters, cord-shavers, cord-couplers or cord-nevers. This uncertainty over language however is a problem not only in the academic community but also for the other constituencies considered, and it already suggests how fast this area is evolving into complex and multifaceted patterns that are challenging academics and scholars.

Concerning the conception of the cord-cutters that we can extrapolate from research that directly addresses the cutters, we see that it is usually discussed from an industry perspective and in strict relation with its impacts and influences on the television industry practices. Keeping in mind

that television has always been in constant flux, historically its changes have been addressed from contrasting perspectives where new positions are met with extreme positions. In the case of the cord-cutting phenomenon, on the one hand there is a more utopian democratising media dimension that emphasizes these shifts in values and attitudes in the light of broader processes of viewers' empowerment and increased user agency. From this perspective, viewers' empowerment goes alongside the increasing popularity of Internet that accelerates the so-called "over-the-top bypass" (Banerjee, Rappoport, and Alleman 2014, 59), and it levels the playing field for cable companies and other incumbent distribution platforms (Johnson 2014). On the other hand, there is a more encroaching dimension that highlights how certain online audience practices, like cord-cutting behaviours, are negatively affecting the legitimacy of established distribution platforms and decreasing the exchange value of television content. Indeed, cord-cutting behaviours are fuelled by "an online culture defined by free information and entertainment" (Strangelove 2015, 16) that is blurring the social perception of legality and illegality in the context of television. Nowadays, "whereas content is still discernibly 'television' [...] the authority of a site or a company to act as television distributor is considerably less discernible" (Evans 2011, 64), actually, quite often illegality is increasingly socially valued by online viewers who are willing to pay less and less for more and more content.

Finally, cord-cutters have been even implicitly perceived as part of the growing "audience that doesn't *watch* TV anymore" (Dixon, Wheeler 2013, 110), implying that their significant consumption of television content through online delivery platforms and new televisual interfaces may not be considered as 'TV watching,' but rather as a consumption mode typical of a post-television culture. Indeed, they represent an alternative to those behaviours formerly known as 'TV watching,' a counterforce of the post-television era like digital piracy, that is oppositional to the mainstream culture of digital entertainment that media corporation are attempting to propagate (Strangelove 2015, 51). From this idea of a counterforce used by Strangelove to describe digital piracy, stems my conceptualization of the cord-cutting counterpublic that I will now discuss.

The Cord-Cutting Counterpublic

From the framework just presented, we see that cord-cutting is a discursively contested phenomenon that is challenging the television industry, media regulators and academics alike, even though it has gathered more attention in the television industry than in the academy. Every discursive perception of the cutters adds a different shade to this patchwork, helping us in understanding this multifaceted phenomenon from the various perspectives of the four main

constituencies. However, within this scenario, what is missing is a broader conceptualization of how the cord-cutting phenomenon could be theoretically and culturally framed.

In this sense, I would use this groundwork as a base to advance the conceptualization of the cutters as a cord-cutting counterpublic whose symbolic power is having almost disproportionate effects on the established television ecosystem and on the notion of television itself. The vision of this phenomenon as a burgeoning counterpublic which could serve as a current discursive entity “serves as a free-floating signifier for the playing out of competing conceptions of the threat/potential” (Uricchio and Pearson 1994, 2) of today’s cross-media television and newfound watching behaviours. By doing so, I attempt to give an heuristic label to this current and fast developing phenomenon, which could help us in better understanding the reality of the cord-cutters, and to grasp their present – and possibly future - role in the power interplay of the television distribution system.

Keeping this in mind, firstly I want to clarify the notion of counterpublic that I am using in my work. With the term counterpublic, I primarily refer to the works of critical and feminist theorist Nancy Fraser, and social theorist and critic Michael Warner. In particular, in his “Publics and Counterpublics” Warner revisits Fraser’s notion of ‘subaltern counterpublics’ (1992) detailing its characteristics and features. Counterpublics are defined as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional, or at least alternative, interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1992, 123). Moreover, counterpublics tend to maintain at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of their subordinate status, in the sense that their members are usually aware that the cultural horizon against which they mark themselves off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one (Warner 2002, 86). Apart from their subordinate nature, counterpublics are still ‘a public,’ and therefore represent similar characteristics. In particular, Warner argues that counterpublics, as well as publics, are self-organized as “they come into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (86); they are constituted through mere attention (60); the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal (57); they have an ongoing life but they act historically according to the temporality of the counter-discourse’s circulation (68); and circulation takes place in multi-contextual spaces supported by a vast array of media outlets (85).

This notion can be applied to the fringe audience of the cord-cutters whose silent resistance against the calcified television system is now becoming a broader cultural phenomenon and it is contributing to the larger redefinition of television. Indeed, the cutters’ discursive conceptions show us that such a borderline audience is completely self-organized, in the sense that it started with changing audience reception practices, and then came into existence by virtue of being addressed by

various media outlets. Moreover, the transnational and at the same time individualized character of the cord-cutting phenomenon shows that this counterpublic is based on a relation among strangers whose interconnections and interactions play out on a vast array of media platforms, from television and its distribution platforms, to books, online sharing sites, blogs etc. Thus, it can be interpreted as a multi-contextual space of circulation of information and entertainment, organized not by a place or an institution, but by the audience practices and the circulation of discourse itself.

The emerging cord-cutting counterpublic proved to have a symbolic power that is shaping the way we socially and culturally experience television. This force equally influences - and is influenced by - audience practices as well as the strategies of the television distribution system. In fact, digital technologies and networked computer systems have offered those on the margins not only effective ways of circumventing but even undermining top-down concentrated television industries and their delivery platforms (Uricchio 2006, 65). Thus, although the cutters are a subaltern and marginal counterpublic, the stakes of their contestation of power and the right to shape and distribute culture are significant. On such media contestation rests their symbolic power, which is relevant to way media capital is today constituted in the television industry, but it is also relevant to the wider field of political and cultural power, and to social space as a whole (Couldry 2003, 664). At this point though, we need to be clear about what I intend by 'symbolic power.' With this term, I refer in particular to the notion theorized by media scholar Nick Couldry, who integrates the 'weak' definition of symbolic power given by John Thompson (1995), with a stronger notion conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu (1990). Couldry describes the symbolic power as both a cognitive and social force that can intervene in the course of events, influencing the construction of the social and cultural realities (2003, 664).

Couldry's notion of symbolic power is tightly related to media, and in particular to television, since media products include economic and political capital, but above all else, they "are concerned with the production and exchange of symbolic power" (2006, 65). The cutters are entering exactly these dynamics of production and exchanges of symbolic power. Thus, even if the example of media contestation given by such audience practices might seem marginal because it is limited to the activities of a counterpublic, I believe that their effects on how we socially and culturally construct television may be profound. Indeed, rephrasing Uricchio's words, to contest media power is to contest the way that social life itself is defined or named; in our case, it involves contesting the prevailing definition of television and 'TV watching' behaviour, as well as contesting the television institution's pre-eminent definition of our frame of access for the realities of the social world (Uricchio 2006, 65). In other words, the silent revolution of the cutters' counterpublic is pushing the boundaries of how 'television' is socially and culturally constructed nowadays.

Rephrasing what Strangelove argued about digital piracy - which is tightly related with cord-cutting practices – we could say that behind the cord-cutting counterpublic “stands a set of forces that are potential change agents in areas far removed from economic arguments or simplistic moral equations” (2015, 71). Furthermore, the cord-cutting counterpublic could initiate “new positive evaluations of television in the context of digital convergence,” rendering the notion of the medium and of new viewing habits more culturally legitimate than they have been (Newman 2012, 194).

As counterpublic, the cutters and their discursive conceptions have an ongoing life, but at the same time, they act historically, in the sense that their activities reflect the historical contexts in which they have emerged. Broadcasting media appeared at a time when political and economic power and resources were concentrated and centralized, while the population at large was undergoing modernization processes (Gripsrud 2010, 6); the transmedia narrowcasting paradigm that accompanied the rise of the cutters appeared at a time when the media industry is undergoing processes of decentralization and de-territorialisation. Thus, while broadcasting was initiated as “a new and powerful form of social integration and control” (Williams 23) aimed at mass audiences, today’s transmedia digital television enabled proactive viewers like the cutters to find and provide alternatives to the dominant corporate media systems. Receiving television on a TV set and through cable or satellite connection is still the dominant way of accessing television content, however the cord-cutting counterpublic is constantly seeking new television alternatives which best suit their interests and needs. Binge-watching, streaming and downloading via subscription-based OTT providers like Netflix or Hulu; accessing television content online for free through more or less legal platforms like Popcorn Time or Pirate Bay; using laptops, tablets or smartphone: these are examples of television alternatives that are being legitimated by the action of the cord-cutting counterpublic. Moreover, these alternatives are often morphing outside the margins of the ‘old’ TV system, blurring the boundaries of what used to be considered as television and ‘TV watching’ behaviours or not. The power of the cutters comes into play here, legitimating such newfound forms of television and watching behaviours as television.

However, this conceptualization of the cutters is not without its complexities and limits. Indeed, we should avoid falling into the mundane and exalted discourse of the revolutionary viewers who are breaking open the television distribution bottleneck and disrupting the notion of television. What I am arguing is that the emergence of the cord-cutting phenomenon can be seen as symptomatic of a larger redefinition of television’s every facet i.e. as a techno-cultural form, an institution, an industry, a programming practice and audience practice. In this sense, we can interpret this phenomenon as a burgeoning media counterpublic whose symbolic power is both reshaping the social and cultural construction of television, as well as, entering - and altering - the

power dynamics of the television distribution system, whose focus is shifting towards the control over the Internet broadband pipelines. How the cord-cutting counterpublic is influencing such dynamics will be further discussed in the next chapter. However, entering such power interplay does not directly imply that they will completely disrupt the established television system. On the contrary, the fundamental social conditions that, according to Raymond Williams, made broadcasting so socially relevant and valuable generally remain: we still have a primarily centralized political and economic power on the one hand, and seemingly ever-more mobile, privatized people on the other; there is still a need for a focus, a limited set of central arenas in a comprehensive, general public sphere; mobile and privatized people also need a sense of community that broadcasting and its ‘currency’ can provide; and lastly, nation states are weaker than they used to be but still not at all dead (Gripsrud 2010, 20). Thus, broadcast television will most likely continue to exist, but it will not remain the same. It must relate to the changing environment where counterpublics like the cutters are bringing new windows of opportunity as well as challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in today’s context of digital convergence we see that the cord-cutters emerge as a discursively contested phenomenon, and the various discursive perceptions presented help us in understanding this multifaceted reality. In particular, I argued that each discursive stance of the cutters sheds light on certain facets, that I then translated into a broader conceptualization of these viewers as a burgeoning and generation counterpublic. By doing so I framed the cord-cutting counterpublic in social, cultural and political-economic terms to set the foreground for the following analysis of the effects of its symbolic power.

3

Dynamics of Resistance and Resilience

Caldwell is right in emphasizing the importance of cultures of production, however I believe that to understand today's notion of television and its "dot-com permutations" (Caldwell 2004, 45), scholars need to pay as much attention to cultures of consumption and distribution as they do to production. In fact, with the growing influence of the cord-cutting counterpublic, symbolic power is inducing disproportionate reactions from the television industry, affecting in particular the incumbent distribution platforms. To gain a better understanding of the cord-cutting counterpublic and its effects on both the industry practices, as well as, on the television medium, we should now investigate my second research question: *how is the cord-cutting counterpublic mutually shaped by the viewers' practices as well as the industry's responses, and how does its symbolic power affect the power interplay of the contemporary television distribution platforms?* In other words, why are certain viewers opting out, and what new alternatives are they seeking? And in response, how is the industry trying to answer their needs and recapture them in their networks?

Given the theoretical groundwork presented in the previous chapter, I will now attempt to answer to my second research question by exploring the interplay between the resistance movement of the cutters and the resilience of the television distribution system. To do this, I have used a deductive approach based on the collection of qualitative data and information gathered from four main types of sources: scholarly works; trade press; popular press; and the 'voices' of the cutters as they appear on websites, social networks, online forums and blogs. In particular, in the first section I will analyse four main categories of motivational drivers of the cord-cutters, while in the second one, I will discuss the relative responses and strategies implemented by the considered segments of the television distribution industry. As final remark, it should be noted there is no clear cut correspondence of each motive to an industry response; on the contrary, a mismatch is most likely to appear in certain cases. Nevertheless, the purpose is to explore how they interact in order to investigate the interplay between the resistance movement of the cutters and the resilience of the established television distribution industry. Because this categorization is functional, it simplifies

complex and multifaceted dynamics, inevitably limiting the nuance of my research. At the same time though, this simplicity has the advantage of showing clearly the dynamics of a fast-developing phenomenon that is tightly embedded with larger shifts in the contemporary television ecosystem. Indeed, the emergence of the cord-cutting counterpublic and the effects of its symbolic power are inscribed in broader macro-dynamics that not only involve the whole distribution chain and the television system in general, but they even go beyond it, since as I have already suggested, there are wider political, social and economic interests at stake in this power interplay.

3.1. Motivational Drivers of the Cord-Cutters

To cut or not to cut? This is the question that many viewers are asking themselves nowadays. But what drives some of them to actually snip the cable cord and seek for alternative ways of access television content? The cord-cutting phenomenon can be attributed to a host of factors, from personal ideologies, to dissatisfaction with commercial television programming, rising cable subscription costs, or the spread of innovative delivery technologies and televisual interfaces (Strangelove 2015, 94). The motives and rationales that I will present and discuss in the following paragraphs are drawn from the collection of qualitative data from both the ‘voices’ of the cutters i.e. blogs, forum, websites, online cord-cutting guides; as well as, from previous academic research on the cord-cutting phenomenon (see for instance Baccarne, Evens and Schuurman 2013; Banerjee, Rappoport, and Alleman 2013; Evens and Donders 2013; Strangelove 2015). From these sources, I have then distilled the main tropes, and as a result, I have identified the following four main categories of motivational drivers: ‘desire to be freed from any constraints’, ‘moral superiority complex’, ‘desire for multiplatform and multimedia services’ and ‘increased online social connection.’ Since we are dealing with a fast-developing and inchoate counterpublic, it is difficult to associate certain drivers to specific sub-groups within the cutters; moreover, cutting the cord is often a personal choice that results from a combination of motives. Thus, we could say that the four categories identified are ‘ideal categories’ based on general tropes that characterize the U.S. cord-cutting counterpublic as a whole.

3.1.1. Desire to Be Freed from Any Constraints

Generally, the experience of the cord-cutters is primarily related to their desire of being freed from any constraints, which is fundamentally related to the demand of having more control over their own televisual experience. In particular, cutters often express the need for ‘freedom’ in a wide sense

that includes freedom from paying for television content, as well as, freedom from restricted choices and bundled services. In other words, cord-cutters want to watch whatever they wish, whenever they wish, on whatever screen they have available, and possibly for free, or at least at a good price. Actually, audience practices from the use of the remote control to cord-cutting and digital piracy have increasingly demonstrated the viewers' desire to personalize their televisual experience and to escape the control of the television industry, which instead, "has a long history of trying to control audiences and limit choices" (Strangelove 2015, 21). Now, I will dive into the various aspects of this request for 'freedom,' exploring how this need is prompting cord-cutting behaviours.

Firstly, cord-cutting needs to be understood, at least in part, as audience responses to economic hardship and pricing issues in the marketplace, especially in the U.S. (Strangelove 2015, 114). As we have discussed in the previous chapter, thanks to the oligopoly of cable television providers, the costs of bundled services that offer cable, broadband and landline telephone have risen considerably in the past years, ranging from \$35 - usually Internet only - up to \$200 per month. Take this and combine it with a moment of economic hardship, stir in a rough job market especially for the younger generations, and the idea of paying \$100 a month for a suite of channels of which only few are actually used is "as realistic as *Paranormal Activity*" (Shapiro 2012). Indeed, as former Pivot TV president Evan Shapiro emphasizes, while young generations continue to graduate from college and move into the workplace, they are increasingly demanding a low-cost, efficient alternative for pay-TV service, and they are not willing to pay for 500 channels when they only use 10 (Shapiro 2012).¹⁷ In this regard, during my interview with Glaser, the author of the cord-cutting Manifesto declared that also his main reason for cutting the cord in the first place was related to the rising costs of bundled services of cable TV, broadband and telephone landline, which "eventually pushed prices too far" (Glaser 2015).

This economic-driven motive emerges in almost every online 'cord-cutting guide' that has dedicated sections on how to find the best deal amongst the increasing number of services now available online. As the headline of the website *IcutCable.com* suggests, the aim of cutting the cord is "to get more content for less," which can imply free content, especially when cord-cutting behaviours result in digital piracy, but primarily it refers to cheaper and more customized television menus served via the numerous online television platforms. In fact, as "Your Guide to Cable TV Cord-Cutting" published on the website *Tom's Guide* emphasizes, almost no legal streaming service is free, but the cost is extremely low compared to the average cable television price. For instance,

¹⁷ Pivot TV is an American digital cable and satellite television network owned by Participant Media. The channel, targeted at young adults between 18 and 34 years old, debuted on August 1, 2013.

Hulu runs \$8 per month; Netflix \$9 per month; Amazon Instant Video \$99 per year; the new HBO Now - HBO online streaming service that does not need any cable subscription - costs \$15 per month; and Sling TV starts at \$20 per month. Sling TV actually, the OTT television provider owned by the satellite company Dish Network, is ostensibly aimed at cord-cutters since it delivers a good selection of cable channels via broadband, including ESPN, AMC, TNT, CNN, History, HDTV and the Disney Channel. Alongside these subscription-based services, there are also questionable and absolutely illegal opportunities to access television content online for free via downloading, real time streaming, and even the retransmission of live programming, including premium, pay-TV sporting events (Frieden 2011, 2). Between these wide varieties, currently one of the most popular illegal OTT service is Popcorn Time, dubbed “the Netflix for piracy” by the BBC (Lee 2014; Lyne 2014). This service offers a Netflix-like interface for accessing free television content and movies by streaming BitTorrent files illegally shared. Popcorn Time though is just one of the examples of the more or less legal online platforms used by cord-cutters. In fact, almost every day new ones pop-up and other get shut-down, starting from the well-known Swedish Pirate Bay, to other sites like Alluc.com, Putlocker, Pirate Streaming and so on. Last but not least, the VPN proxy is another crucial way to circumvent the industry and get free access to international content bypassing geo-blocking and restricted-access issues that often bother the cord-cutting counterpublic.

Even though the economic driver is highly relevant for cord-cutting, we need to acknowledge that “motives of the cord-cutting segment of the online audience go far beyond mere economic hardship; rational choice and economic self-interest in a newly competitive television marketplace are also motivating online audiences to cut the cord and ditch the more expensive option of traditional pay-TV” (Strangelove 2015, 99-100). In this regard indeed, a second important factor that relates to the desire of freedom expressed by the cutters concerns the desire to de-bundle, in other words, to fight the industry practice of bundling channels (Strangelove 2015, 108). Bundling is a common feature in many imperfectly competitive product markets, and is evident particularly with firms in the telecommunications and information industries (Crawford and Cullen 2007, 380). A clear example of this strategy can be seen in the U.S. cable television industry where companies like Comcast, Time Warner, AT&T or Verizon, “choose a portfolio of television networks, bundle them into services, and offer these services to consumers in local, geographically separate, cable markets” (Crawford and Cullen 2007, 391). The three main types of program networks offered on cable are broadcast networks and cable networks, typically bundled and offered as *Basic* and *Expanded Basic Services*; and premium networks, that are typically unbundled and sold as *Premium Services* (Crawford and Cullen 2007, 391).¹⁸ Furthermore, bundling does not only

¹⁸ Examples of each type are ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX for broadcast networks, MTV, CNN, and ESPN for

relate to the multichannel packages, but it also concerns the offer of cable television service combined with a broadband connection and telephone landline. This particular bundled service is known as “triple play”, that is, provisioning two bandwidth-intensive services (broadband internet access and television) over a single broadband connection,, combined with a latency-sensitive telephone, all in “an attractively priced combination packages” (McGrail and Roberts 53).

Recent research has shown that bundling is a very lucrative practice for the cable television industry since it can be used to price-discriminate among consumers and/or to extend market power; moreover, it increases profits for cable companies, especially in comparison with other pricing and selling strategies like *à la carte* sales (Bakos and Brynjolfsson 1999; Chae 1992; Crampes and Hollander 2005; Crawford 2006; Crawford and Cullen 2007). However, whereas bundling is profitable for the television industry, it highly constrains the consumers’ choices. Indeed, viewers’ are basically forced to pay for multichannel packages just to watch those few networks in which they are actually interested. In May 2014, Nielsen reported that the average number of channels subscribed to was 189.1, but the average number watched was only 17.5 (Nielsen 2014). Thus, while on the one hand, television’s lobby has resisted all efforts to de-bundle billing practices, on the other, consumers are increasingly demanding more customized *à la carte* or pay-per-view programming, which are offered instead by online OTT providers. Thus, this desire to de-bundle is prompting a growing number of viewers to cut the cord and turn over the Internet to watch what they want.

This desire to de-bundle was actually at the base of the disruption of traditional distribution model in the music industry. Whereas, throughout the 1990s consumers were forced to pay for bundled products like CD albums that contained many songs they did not want, by the 2000s “digital consumers electronics, the mass adoption of the Internet and the changing consumer habits led to massive de-bundling in the music sector” (Strangelove 2015, 177). In fact, eventually music lovers were able to go online and access only the music content they wanted, disintermediating the established distribution platforms while seeking for new alternatives like iTunes or Spotify. Similarly to this case, the cord-cutters’ desire to de-bundle is mainly related to two major rationales: the fight against the corporate triple-play, and the freedom of choice.

With regard to the fight against the “triple play,” it appears that the cord-cutters’ exasperation and frustration for this industry practice is tightly interconnected with the economically-driven motive of the cutters who demand to pay just for the services they want. In this case, as I will further explain in the following section, the “triple play” is a double edge sword, since on one side, it is an efficient industry strategy to discourage cord-cutting; on the other side

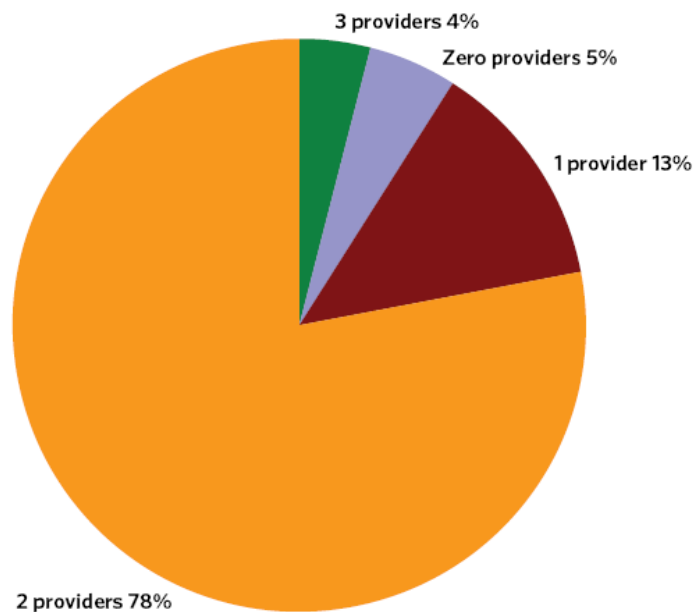
cable programming networks, and HBO and Showtime for premium networks.

though, it can also frustrate certain viewers to such an extent that they actually snip the cord and join the ranks of the cord-cutting counterpublic. This fact is clearly elucidated by Glaser in “The Cord-Cutting Manifesto” that states:

“We refuse to pay inflated prices to watch the TV shows we want. We don’t want to have 500 channels force-fed to us so we can watch the four networks we want. [...] Enough with the “Triple Play” or bundle of services. How many people are now stuck with landline telephones because of some kind of bundle deal when they would be perfectly fine having a cell phone at home?” (Glaser 2012)

Furthermore, from a broader perspective, the cutters’ desire to defeat the “triple play” emblemizes their attempt to fight certain industry practices that tend to ‘play’ customers and create oligopolistic markets with no real competition between incumbent cable television and internet providers (Cassidy 2014). Indeed, often U.S. consumers are left with strictly limited options. In particular, according to the 2010 “National Broadband Plan” reported by the FCC “approximately 96% of the population has at most two wireline providers,” which are usually cable operators that provide cable TV, telephone landline and broadband connection (Federal Communications Commission 2010, 37). More specifically, approximately 4% of housing units are in areas with three wireline providers, either DSL or cable; 78% lives in areas with two wireline providers; about 13% are in areas with a single wireline provider; while the remaining 5% have no wireline provider at all (see fig.3.1). Such a situation was probably allowed by regulations that were too soft, and advanced and ubiquitous cable infrastructures that enabled “cable companies to offer broadband access services to large portions of the country, in many cases even before the telephone companies” (Federal Communications Commission 2010, 37). Hence, even though certain viewers would like to cut the cable cord, they cannot easily live without high-speed Internet service, and for that they are often forced to rely on the same local cable television operators from which they wanted to be freed (Benkoil 2015).

Fig. 3.1 The chart shows the share of housing units in census tracts with respectively 0, 1, 2, and 3 Wireline Providers (Federal Communication Commission 2010)



Fighting the industry “triple play” and bundling strategies is in turn related to the desire for freedom of choice, which is a strong and widely shared motivational driver among the cutters. Indeed, cord-cutters demand a televisual experience freed from any constraints, which they understand not only as restricted bundled choices, but also as geo-blocking and timing of scheduled programming. These issues are often perceived as limitations imposed on the viewer’s television experience in favour of the economic interests of the industry. In this regard, Frieden notes that while cutters appear willing to tolerate significant difference in the visual and audio quality of service between screens and delivery platforms, “they appear less patient with attempts by content creators and distributors to ‘close ranks’ and restrict access from alternative, non-incumbent platforms” (2011, 4). In fact, in these cases the lure of early access is strong, and often driven by factors such as cultural cachet of seeing something before others, the desire to participate in a global fan community, the fear of being spoiled, or “most fundamentally there is the desire to not have to wait when one feels it’s not warranted” (Becker 2014). Such a notion of impatience includes accessing international television content with no geo-blocking limitation; watching the desired program with independent and personal scheduling, but at the same time, also being able to watch it as soon as it is aired without the necessity of being cable subscribers. These motives are prompting viewers to change their watching behaviours, legitimating audience practices like online binge-

watching. Indeed, as Jason Jacobs argues, such viewing practices serve to remove any ‘pollution’ from the text (2011). Moreover, digital television technology and today online delivery platforms actually promote various ways to own, time- and space-shift or otherwise mine texts as obvious and routinized ways to interact with the medium rather than viewing the schedule in real time (2011, 259). Thus, today we are witnessing “only one round of an ongoing fight between content’s gatekeepers and viewers seeking to access television content on their own terms and without borders” (Becker 2014).

Finally, the idea of removing any ‘pollution’ (Jacobs 2011) from the television content and having a televisual experience freed from any constraints is also related to the desire of the cutters to avoid advertising, commercial and infomercial breaks. In fact, some viewers are motivated to drop their pay-TV subscription and cut the cable cord because they feel that they are they are paying for the ‘privilege’ of being subjected to incessant advertising (Strangelove 2015, 111).¹⁹ In online blogs, cord-cutting guides and cutters’ online diaries, quite often viewers have expressed their frustration with commercial breaks and other forms of advertisement in broadcast television as one of the reasons why they decided to abandon cable TV and use ad-free OTT television providers like Netflix. Even Jeff Gaspin, former head of the entertainment at NBC television network, is an example of today’s advertising-avoiding television viewer. When he and his 13-years old son got hooked by the first two episodes of *The Walking Dead* (2010), they watched the first two years collecting the episodes through every means available — some from Netflix, some from iTunes, some recorded on the family DVR (Carter 2012). “We learned a new behaviour,” Gaspin told to the *New York Times*. Then finally caught up to this season’s finale they watched it “live” and the disappointment was overwhelming: “It was not nearly as good. The commercials broke the tension. We had watched the other episodes with blankets over our heads. I hate to say this to the AMC executives and everybody else in the business, but I will never watch ‘Walking Dead’ live again” (Carter 2012).

¹⁹ This is actually a long running battle in American television. From the inception of television remote control (RCD) to the VCR and today’s digital televisual interfaces, new technologies are used by viewers to optimize their television experience. Often for the audience this means avoiding ads as they can time shift and zip through advertisements, or zap ads in real-time television (Uricchio 2004, 168). In this regard, in the first half of the 1960s the popular press dubbed the RCD “television silencer,” intended as ad-silencer (Uricchio 2004, 170). However, while from an audience perspective, such new technologies enhance the quality of televisual experience, for the industry hitting advertising revenues in this way is a hard blow.

3.1.2. Moral Superiority Complex

Alongside the desire of being freed from any constraints and gaining increasing control over the televisual experience, the cord-cutting counterpublic is moved also by deeper cultural shifts in their attitudes towards television and their televisual experience. In this regard, during a discussion panel on audience online practices at the NECS 2015 Conference “Archive of/for the Future,” a heated debate emerged concerning the shifting attitudes and values towards the changing television and film watching behaviours.²⁰ Interestingly the relatively young presenter more or less inadvertently assumed a position of moral superiority towards those in the audience who were not watching films or television content online through contemporary digital technologies, but were still relying on more ‘traditional’ means of media distribution and consumption. This situation recalled what journalist Michael Callahan wrote in an article in *Philadelphia Magazine* concerning the perceived changing attitudes of viewers towards television. As the author puts it, a “bragging contest over who can unplug the fastest” is emerging among techno-savvy television viewers. (Callahan 2012), celebrating those finally freed from the industry’s constraints and its force-fed television menu. I believe that this contest has partially its roots in what Michael Strangelove describes as a superiority feeling that characterizes the cord-cutters’ attitude (2015, 106-7). In their blogs, websites and publications, cutters frequently depict themselves as conscious, techno-savvy and empowered viewers who represent television’s next generation, and they almost look down on those viewers who are still stuck with the traditional means of access. In this sense, like cutting the umbilical cord for new-borns, cutting the cable cord for this counterpublic assumes the symbolic value of becoming independent viewers who do not rely on the television content force-fed by the industry. Hence, watching ‘mainstream’ television on a traditional TV set has become very passé especially between the young-minded viewers. Indeed, the cord-cutting counterpublic now perceives those habits formerly known as ‘TV watching’ as old-fashioned and retrograde.

This moral superiority complex recalls the older and broader discourse surrounding the adoption of new ways of watching television and using innovative televisual interfaces. As media scholars Michael Z. Newman, and Elana Levine argue, such discourse “is often ecstatic and religious, invoking liberation and redemption” (2012, 130) as in celebration of the new technologies we read of television viewers empowered and freed from their former status as “slaves to the

²⁰ The presenter to which I am referring here is Guido Kirsten, post-doctoral candidate at the Media Studies department of Stockholm University who presented on “Everything for Everyone, and for Free? The Utopian Moment of Cinephilia Online Archive.” The panel was mainly centred on film and cinephilia, although the discussion arisen touched upon issues concerning film and television content access online and the changing watching behaviours of viewers.

schedule” (2012, 130). In this context then, digital convergence offers the means to create a revolution of televisual experience that is freed from the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional programming. Today, television viewers can avoid commercials and ‘mainstream programs,’ while customizing their television menu and watching only what best suits their interests. Through such newly legitimated television viewing behaviours, television is rehabilitated as a productive and respectable way to spend leisure time; moreover television programs are seen to improve to match these new standards (Newman and Levine 2012, 130). In this sense, the cord-cutting counterpublic brings these cultural and paradigm shifts of television one step further, not only legitimating newfound watching behaviours, but almost elevating the cutters’ experiences to a ‘superior’ form of watching television, anticipating the future of the medium. Rephrasing William Boddy’s words on TiVo, we could say that watching television with no strings or ‘cords’ attached is “how God watches television” (2011, 123).²¹ In conclusion then, cutting the cord has taken on the same currency as buying a hybrid or going vegan: *See, I’m better than you* (Callahan 2012). Especially within the younger generation, this ‘moral superiority complex’ emerges as a strong motive to snip the cord, seek alternative modes of access television content, and therefore, join the ranks of the techno-savvy cord-cutting counterpublic.

Underlying this mode of reasoning though, is a deeper cultural shift that reflects almost a reverse attitude towards television, compared to the prevalent one in academia and popular culture. Whereas, a line of thought sees Internet television and its relative distribution platforms as the end of television, or at least as the beginning of a ‘post-television’ era (see Gripsrud 2010; Levine 2011; Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 2008; Strangelove 2015); for the cord-cutters, such post-television era is actually delivering the television experience par excellence. In this sense, this burgeoning counterpublic is pushing the boundaries of how ‘television’ is socially and culturally constructed nowadays, and their symbolic power partially lies on this re-definition of the established notion of television and viewing behaviours. Television has always been in motion as a techno-cultural form and as a practice, since “the medium never sat still” (Keilbach and Stauff 2013, 80), but it has been stabilized as having a stable form in the popular imagination – and in most nations’ regulatory communities, at least from the 1950s to the 1980s. Already back in the 80s, the U.S. cable and satellite technologies shook-up the notion of a broadcast, ad-based ‘TV’, partially disrupting the models of the “network-era” through a multi-channel and commercial transition period (Lotz 2007, 14). This shift was primarily prompted by techno-economic drivers, that in turn influenced industry

²¹ In his *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States*, William Boddy, quotes Andy Ihnatko’s “TiVo revolutionizes TV,” *Chicago Sun-Times* May 8, 2001, 50: “At the end of your first day with TiVo, you will finally blink and shout, ‘Holy cats, this must be how God watches television!’”

as well as audience practices. However, what we are witnessing today with the emergence of the cord-cutting counterpublic is that a new generation of viewers has begun to stabilize and legitimize a particular notion of what television is, and what it should look like in the future. Thus, the traditional conceptualization of “TV” is being disrupted by a burgeoning counterpublic, that even though is still numerically marginal, is seen as representative of the generation that has the future. In other words, an important part of television’s next generation is represented by the cord-cutting counterpublic. In this sense, the effects of the cutters’ symbolic power are disproportionate, since albeit their marginal presence they are contributing to the redefinition of almost every aspect of the television medium: as a techno-cultural form, an institution, an industry, a programming practice and audience practice.

Tightly embedded with the moral superiority complex is the ethical and moral commitment of the most activist part of the cord-cutting counterpublic. In the U.S., such commitment has been directed to media policy matters regarding in particular the support of ‘Net Neutrality’ and ‘Open Access’ to outlaw the discriminatory practices of some of the U.S. cable giants. One of the key developments in the regulatory arena for the digital convergent market of the television industry concerns the enforcement of Net Neutrality (Holt and Sanson 2013, 20). Essentially Net Neutrality requires Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to carry all data (or packets) over their wires at the same speed, regardless of who is sending them. That means that ISPs could not be discriminatory in their distribution of content, and therefore could not send it faster – or slower – based on proprietary interests, competitive strategies, or financial arrangements benefiting those who own the digital pipelines (Holt and Sanson 2013, 21). In a nutshell, as John Oliver said in his show *Last Week Tonight*, “it basically means that all data has to be treated equally, no matter who creates it” (Oliver 2014).

At the heart of the issue was a concern by ISPs that fastest growing sector of bandwidth use was for video use. The fear from critics of the industry was that ISPs would give preferential treatment to their video content since all are also aligned with content providers, and consequently slow down the competition. Given the status quo where the biggest cable television providers are also the major broadband providers, we might risk that they will race to turn the open Web into something that looks like cable TV, said Craig Aaron, president and CEO of Free Press (Bruinius 2014). Thus, the implementation of Net Neutrality policies are crucial for both the Internet industry and the television one, but it is also fundamentally important for consumers of cloud-based media today (Holt and Sanson 2013, 21). The concept of net neutrality essentially applies the principle of common carriage to broadband service, similar to its application for the telephone service, in the sense that common carriers are considered essential infrastructures for the national economy and

public welfare, therefore their providers cannot discriminate against those who wish to use the services or provide preferential treatment to certain customers. In the case of television or in general video content distribution, it would prevent the discrimination of offering faster – or slower-delivery service to certain providers according to the private economic interests. Thus, the fears shared by the cutters and all the supporters of Net Neutrality is that alliances between cable companies and content providers would result in preferential treatment for ‘their’ content providers, and discrimination against outside content. To avoid this situation, Net Neutrality media policy needs to ensure a technology neutral approach in the design of regulation, since only if a standard non-discrimination is supported properly through law and applied to Internet service, it “could potentially be used to wrest some measure of control from the highly powerful ISPs, and ensure the public a freer and more open Internet with less risk of interference from those controlling its distribution” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 21).

The effects of the symbolic power of the cord-cutting counterpublic have helped trigger controversial dynamics in the power interplay between cable television giants, ISPs and emerging OTT television providers. The energies mobilized for the Net Neutrality case – not to mention the eventual victory – empowered activists like the cord-cutters to raise against the takeover of Time Warner Cable from Comcast, considered as “the largest cable merger in history” (Kasperkevic 2015). Although I will further discuss this case in the following section, we should keep in tow that this merger could have negatively influenced the present viability and realization of Net Neutrality as a legal standard for broadband regulation, besides the obvious consequent of creating almost a monopoly in the cable television industry. Thus, even though in April 2015 the deal was basically doomed in the face of a threat from the FCC (Thielman 2015), the potential implications of this merger enhanced the ethical and moral commitment of some exponents of the cord-cutting counterpublic. In fact, cord-cutters had huge stakes in this fight, bemoaning their lack of choice, since they would have faced an even more consolidated and aggregated market (Kasperkevic 2015), with an increased control of offline and online distribution platforms. Thus, what appeared as a resilient strategy of incumbent cable operators to contain the cutters and re-gain their market share has come to strengthen the viewers’ desire to actually snip the cord and find ways to circumvent the established television system.

3.1.3. Desire for Multimedia and Cross-Platform Television Services

Being mostly young and techno-savvy consumers, cord-cutters are leading the new media revolution of television, and they are seeking to fully exploit the potential of today’s cross-media

television and its digital delivery technologies. A third category of motives that emerged from my research is thus related to the desire for multimedia and cross-platform services often expressed by television viewers. Indeed, as the fourth point of the list of demands expressed in the cord-cutting manifesto states, cutters want television services that can be played on all devices, from the big-screen TV, to smartphones, tablets, computers and “on whatever invention comes next that has a screen” (Glaser 2012).

According to the Nielsen’s 2014 “Total Audience Report,” as of November 2014, over 40% of U.S. households had access to an online subscription-based video on-demand (SVOD) service, like Netflix, Hulu Plus or Amazon Prime, and 13% boasted multiple streaming services (Nielsen 2014). On average these consumers spend more time watching time-shifted television on a screen other than on the traditional TV set (Steel 2015). Thus, while a growing number of viewers are using multimedia and cross-platform television services, the time spent watching television through the classical TV set declined nearly 10% in the second half of 2014 (Steel 2015). Such shifts in audience habits are playing out against and enabled by a backdrop of rapidly changing technological possibilities that are developing around ‘mobile television.’ Early adopters’ ideals about media textual mobility consider the smaller screens of the iPod, mobile telephone or laptops as “extensions of, and not alternatives to, established media,” in this sense they expect that “television sought out programming adept at inhabiting a number of screens” (Dawson 2007, 235). In other words, as cord-cutters *in primis* emphasize, viewers increasingly demand multimedia and cross-platform television services that can be played on all devices (Glaser 2012). Thus, when programmers or distributors fail to provide these services, “viewers take initiative and create it for themselves, employing a variety of high and low-tech methods to make their media mobile” (Dawson 2007, 235). Taking initiative might imply also ditching the traditional means of television delivery, or at least extending the consumption of television content beyond the TV screen, towards the creation of a multimedia mobile experience.

To describe this trend, Max Dawson uses the term “unbundling,” not as a way of fighting the bundling strategies of media corporation that I have previously addressed as desire to de-bundle, but as a content factor. Unbundling “describes the dismantling of integral television texts into fragmentary, yet self-contained, segments” that viewers may watch one at a time, or combine them with pieces of other unbundled texts to construct longer narrative and/or visual sequences (Dawson 2007, 234). Dawson introduced this term to better describe the aesthetic shifts of ‘mobile television’ that currently encompass a wide range of heterogeneous cultural forms that have in common “their amenability to a type of extreme textual segmentation” (2007, 235). These forms include mobisodes (short content produced for mobile telephones), webisodes (episodic content designed for web

playback), viral videos (short clips uploaded to video sharing websites like YouTube and Google Video and, increasingly, showcased on US cable channels), vlogs (video blogs), machinima (scenes from video games edited with original dialogue), digests (abridgements of primetime network programming, sporting events etc.), and even primetime serial dramas like *Lost* (Dawson 2007, 234)

Such televisual forms attract an increasing percentage of viewers and moreover, and they tend to be watched un-bundled from other television content. Thus, to watch them, viewers are using both alternative distribution platforms like streaming/downloading services, OTT providers, as well as, multiple and possibly mobile screens. This does not necessarily imply that they are substituting the traditional television services with ‘mobile television,’ however it does show that viewers are getting accustomed to time and space-shifting technologies that are seen as almost required extensions of the TV set. Often, the use of these innovative services goes alongside the reduction of hours spent watching TV in a traditional sense, thus incumbent distribution platforms like cable and satellite that do not provide these services might be perceived as old-fashioned/passé. Hence, in conclusion, this desire for multimedia and cross-platform television services is prompting a growing percentage of viewers to reduce their larger cable television packages, ‘shave’ their cord and rely more on lower-cost pay-TV packages supplemented with OTT and mobile television options.

3.1.4. Increased Online Social Connection and Participation

The fourth and last category identified by examining the public-facing discourse of the cord-cutters and the main platforms used by this counterpublic, is interconnected with the increased online social connection and participation that is prompting the changing watching behaviour of certain viewers. Since cable television enabled the fragmentation of the viewing audience in the early 1980s and broke up the big three networks’ oligopoly, sources of “water-cooler conversation” and interpersonal exchange on television experiences began to change (Sodano 2012, 38). The redefinition of such interpersonal and cultural exchange was enhanced as cross-media distribution platforms expanded and “the television audience continues to splinter further” (Sodano 2012, 27). As the cord-cutting counterpublic and their newfound viewing behaviours reshape the television medium, audience fragmentation and processes of individualization and customization of the televisual experience have exponentially increased. The shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting and personalized televisual experiences has been pushed to the extreme by the cord-cutting counterpublic, since almost every cutter has his/her own television menu based on different media

platforms, personal programming choices, and “convenience technologies [that] encourage active selection” (Lotz 2007, 59). Such individualization of the television experience, though, does not imply a reduced connectivity between viewers, but it does induce significant changes in how such connectivity is expressed. The network-era chatter based on synchronicity of linear viewing and shared content for discussion (Lotz 2007, 32) has been replaced by countless online options. On one hand, the assumption that everyone watched last night’s episode of a hit TV show no longer holds water as it were, because the odds have grown slimmer that everyone watched the same show at *any* time. On the other hand, as digital and social media platforms increasingly serve as popular locations for these conversations, “the water-cooler trope has given way to the water bottle, since viewers can participate privately and alone with their computers, smartphones and portable media players” (Sodano 2012, 38).

Today’s multiple delivery platforms for television content and multimedia televisual interfaces sell the ability to “disconnect” from your television set, and simultaneously create an expanding array of opportunities for audiences to reconnect with one another and to engage with television content, promising constant connectivity and instantaneous access (Holt and Sanson 2013, 7). In other words, the affordances of so-called “spreadable media” (Jenkins, Green, and Ford 2013) provide a catalyst for reconceptualising cultural relations with the television medium and social interrelations. These shifts signal a movement towards a more participatory approach to television, one that sees the public not simply as consumers of pre-constructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing television content in ways that might not have been previously imagined, and “they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within larger communities and networks, which allow them to spread content well beyond their immediate geographic proximity” (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, 2).

To keep up with this new “culture of connectivity” (Van Dijk 2013) and its forms of online social connection and participation, the traditional means of television distribution and consumption are no longer enough. As television scholar Karen Lury argues, “television is inherently about ‘keeping up’ – a pressure driven by the ‘this-is-next-ness’ of television’s narrative dynamic,” but nowadays, to keep yourselves updated it is often necessary to seek alternative television delivery platforms just as the cord-cutting counterpublic is doing (2008). This pressure is a key motivational driver for viewers to use online television delivery platforms, an alternative to the traditional distribution means, inducing audiences to cut, or at least ‘shave’ their cable cords. In other words, the desire to be up to date with the latest news and/or TV shows, and to take active part in this new ‘water-cooler trope,’ encourage viewers to use different platforms to access a wider and at the same time more personalized television menu.

In conclusion, as Lotz argues, once viewers became accustomed to expanded choice and increased control, they tend to seek further customization and a sense of community in order to have their preferred television experiences (2007, 245). To strengthen this sense of community based on online social connection, and actively participate in today's "water-bottle trope" (Sodano 2012, 38) viewers are prompted to use online options to access television, which in turn might lead them to cut the cable cord and ditch completely the traditional TV set, or at least to 'shave' their cord. The 'true' cord-cutters, though, do not take kindly 'cord-shaving,' because, as Sarah Perez author of "The Diary of a Cord Cutter in 2015" states, cord-shavers "are weaning themselves off the old way of doing things; they haven't made a radical shift" (2015). Nevertheless, even though shaving the cord is not cutting the cord in the pure sense, these viewers do add up to the cord-cutting counterpublic' ranks, contributing to the redefinition of the television medium and those behaviours formerly known as 'TV watching.'

3.2. The Empire Strikes Back

Although ours has been characterized as a post-network and post-television era, television as an institution has proven to be resilient to an ongoing series of fundamental economic, technological and cultural changes (Caldwell 2004, 43). Since the early 2000s, one of these major shifts concerns the emergence of what I have defined as the cord-cutting counterpublic. In particular, the cutters have entered – and altered – the dynamics of the television distribution system, taking part in the interplay between the new Internet-based companies and the older established delivery platforms. Due to the migration of subscribers keen on cutting the cord, incumbent delivery platforms, especially cable television operators, risk a disintermediation i.e. elimination as middlemen in a chain of distribution, in favour of OTT and online television providers which can potentially offer viewers a better value proposition for access to desired content (Frieden 2012, 6). However, the television distribution system is attempting to adjust its strategies and practices to respond to the viewers' changing behaviours. Thus, this flurry of changes reflects the efforts of an industry grappling with a tectonic shift in how Americans watch and pay for television (De la Merced 2015). In a nutshell, nowadays while cutters are circumventing the system and seeking television alternatives that better suit their interests, the 'empire strikes back', attempting to stop this burgeoning 'rebel alliance.' Indeed, "unlike television's smug but naïve disregard of cable in the early 1980s" television is now, in effect, "hedging its bets" (Caldwell 2004, 46), that is, continuing with its tried and proven success at distributing content, and simultaneously investing in an array of

start-ups, new delivery technologies and alternative distribution platforms that could stop defectors from leaving the established system (Caldwell 2004, 46).

To connect the cutters' motives and their resistant behaviours with the reactions of the industry, I have grouped the various responses into three principal themes, which roughly correspond to the main cutters' aforementioned motivational drivers. The categories identified are the following: 'circumventing the cutters,' 'cross-platform distribution in a connected viewing system,' and 'cross-media audience engagement.' This categorization necessarily simplifies the complexity of the strategies of resilience implemented by the television distribution system, but has also the advantage of making the dynamics of response appear more clearly. Moreover, my analysis is primarily focused on the television distribution platforms, also referred to as 'pipelines,' like cable, satellite, and broadband providers. In a second instance, the discussion also touches upon emerging Internet and OTT service aggregators like Netflix, Popcorn Time, YouTube or Amazon Instant Video since they are increasingly interconnected with the incumbent delivery platforms. As I previously mentioned, I chose this focus, firstly because the question of the cutters is particularly relevant for the distribution pipelines. Secondly, because I would argue that media delivery systems are not "simply and only technologies" as Jenkins said (2006, 14), but they are techno-cultural forms with a certain level of agency, since they involve human practices, and in Latour's sense, the same technologies themselves have a kind of agency (2005). Indeed, the power and profitability of the television industry resides considerably on distribution practices that in turn make use of particular technologies and viewer-medium interfaces (Cunningham and Silver 2013, 4). However, rather than sticking to hollow aphorisms like "Content is King, but Distribution is King Kong" (Cunningham and Silver 2013, 4), in my work I assume that the power interplay depends on the politico-economic context of television distribution and consumption, including the set of complex relationships between different parties involved in the ever-increasing complex television ecosystem.

3.2.1. Circumventing the Cutters

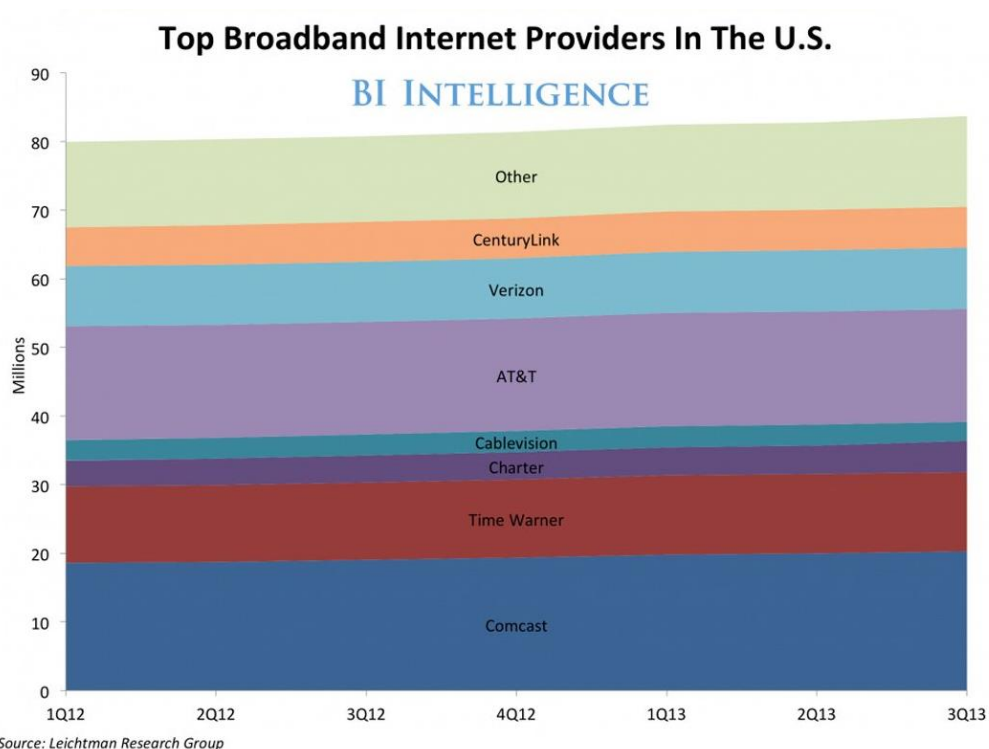
As I previously discussed, one of the main motivational driver at the base of the cord-cutting behaviours is the viewers' desires to be freed from any constraints, expressed as freedom from paying for television content, freedom from bundled services and restricted choices. In response to this desire, the television distribution platforms are adopting several strategies aimed at satisfying viewers, and adjusting the industry practices to the changing environment. Moreover, it emerges that the reactions grouped in this first ideal category have a two-fold agenda: answering the

changing desires of the cord-cutting counterpublic; and at the same time, circumventing them in order to stop the ‘leakage’ i.e. to prevent other viewers from cutting the cord, and/or to recapture those who have already snipped it. Within this scenario, the main strategies implemented to circumvent the cutters are the successful ‘triple play’ service bundling structure and the use of broadband service as power leverage; the diversification of the offer through cheaper and more personalized bundles; cross-industry collaborations and vertical integration strategies; and the more or less explicit influence on the media policy, with particular regard to open access and net neutrality norms.

Firstly, incumbent television distribution platforms are “hedging their bets” through tried and proven strategies which circumvent rather than directly address the cutters’ needs. This strategy is actually what the cord-cutting counterpublic is explicitly attempting to fight: the triple-play and double-play. As previously discussed, triple (or double) play means provisioning over a single broadband connection at least two bandwidth-intensive services, broadband internet access and television and possibly a third, with the latency-sensitive telephone, all in “an attractively priced combination package” (McGrail and Roberts 53). Each company has a wide range of possible combinations of ‘Internet – TV – phone’ varying according the number of channels accessible, the broadband speed and the eventual discounts on phone bills. However, the costs are not competitive, and usually the offer of a single service alone is extremely overpriced compared to the cost of the bundled packages. In this way, the majority of consumers are induced to buy the double or triple bundle since they have access to more services for a relatively low difference in price. Those viewers who are still willing to cut the cable and de-bundle are often hoodwinked, since in most cases the same cable TV company from which they want to be freed is providing them the broadband service. Indeed, since the early 2000s numerous U.S. cable operators turned to broadband service as a way of compensating the loss of cable subscribers (Smith 2015). It is not a hidden agenda; even the cable television titan Comcast is now turning its attention towards broadband Internet service as the future of television distribution system. The result is that today, the majority of U.S. households receive broadband service from cable operators like Comcast, Time Warner, Charter Communications or Cox Communications (see fig. 3.2). Actually, since 2015 the U.S. broadband market has been dominated by Comcast, which now is not only the largest cable operator, but also the nation’s largest Internet service provider. Indeed, the number of people who subscribe to the Comcast’s Internet service surpassed its total video subscribers for the first time in 2015 (Steel 2015).²²

²² Given the current business model of the biggest cable television providers, defining them simply as cable TV companies might be historically correct but at the same time agnostic. In fact, while companies like Comcast, Time

Fig. 3.2 The chart below shows the major broadband internet providers in the U.S. and how this market has slightly evolved from 2012 to 2013 (Edwards 2014).



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Whereas television distribution platforms are still defending their triple and double play strategies, they are at the same time attempting to answer the cutters' needs through a hint of innovation, starting from a diversification of offers, particularly with regard to their bundled services. As I have previously discussed, one of the motives driving the cord-cutting counterpublic concerns viewers' desire to de-bundle and be freed from those force-fed packages of hundreds of channels. It should be noted though that the bundling practice has been increasingly irritating not only to the cutters but even to certain cable operators (Thielman 2015).²³ Indeed, this practice requires companies like Verizon, Time Warner Cable and Charter to buy and distribute a suite of channels rather than the one or two networks that get the highest ratings (Thielman 2015). In other

Warner or Verizon, may have historically started as cable TV companies, now they quickly become general 'cable providers' that are using their existing pipelines and door-to-door infrastructures to carry not simply cable TV, but also telephone and broadband services. Thus, the cable companies are going head to head with especially the phone companies, since the internet part of their business allows them to go wireless. Thus, although I use the term 'television distribution platforms' to describe them, in reality this definition does not fully comprehend all the various signals they carry. In this sense, the triple and double play strategies perfectly reflect the nature of these new businesses.

²³ This situation echoes the question 'block booking' practices of the Hollywood studios that were outlawed in 1948 (the 'Paramount Decrees'), when the studios forced independent theatres to take fixed packages of multiple films rather than the ones they wanted.

words, initially this is the domain of content producers who force themselves on distributors by selling them pre-bundled products; then distributors force those bundles on the consumers, who in exchange for a one price offer subscription have access to a pre-determined set of channels which can range from MTV, Fox News, and MSNBC, to Oxygen, Bravo or E! In 2014, the average number of channels subscribed to was 189.1, but the average number watched was only 17.5 (Nielsen 2014), thus, on average people are interested in only the 9.25% of all the channels that they have to pay for. Therefore, although bundling is still one of the cornerstones of the television industry, several cable players are considering new ways to stop the leakage of the cord-cutters by delivering more personalized television menu. To do so incumbent television distribution platforms are attempting to diversify their offer through “skinny bundles” and “à la carte programming,” putting them on a collision course with certain content providers

“Skinny bundle” are slimmer cable TV packages, in the sense that they give consumers the option of choosing a smaller package of channels than the traditional basic cable subscription. Most likely, traditional bundles are not going to disappear anytime soon; however, neither do the skinny bundles seem a simple fad (Lev-Ram). On the contrary they might represent a crucial strategy for cable operators to contain the cord-cutting phenomenon, as well as to outpace the emerging OTT providers. Indeed, relevant players in the television distribution market are embracing this new competitive practice, introduced by Verizon just at the beginning of 2015. In April 2015 Verizon’s FiOS announced customized television skinny bundles that include a core of basic channels, and smaller add-on packs for sports, news, and other genres (Chapman and Anderson). This initiative was quickly followed by others, such as by the broadcasting and cable company Viacom, which is now working closely with distributors to create flexible packages of networks that meet the varying needs of their subscribers (Smith 2015). Thus, to keep further customers from snipping the cord, cable companies are pushing mini bundles with Web access and popular channels for as low as \$40 a month the first year. Certainly these whittled-down packages are putting pressure on programmers that have relied on the 500-channel pay-TV universe to carry their less-popular niche networks. In this regard, Verizon has been sued by the sports giant ESPN over its plans for skinny bundles and, given that distribution structure is carefully negotiated between broadcasters and distributors in cable deals, “industry experts say Verizon faces an uphill battle to push through its new, skinny packages” (Thielman 2015).²⁴

²⁴ The fact that Verizon was also offering ESPN in skinny bundles is of crucial importance since ESPN and its parent company Disney stand to lose billions of dollars if lawmakers legislate the de-bundling of channels within cable packages (Strangelove 2015, 91). Moreover, it is widely thought that “the desire to see sports events in real time on television will keep the audience tethered to the cable” and therefore, as perhaps its most popular and perishable video

This strategy is not only being implemented by established television distribution platforms; other new actors are joining the playground with appealing and potentially disruptive offers, such as the newly launched Sling TV and Apple TV. Sling TV is an American OTT internet protocol television service that is owned by the Sling TV LLC subsidiary of the satellite TV provider Dish Network. Unveiled on January 5, 2015 at the Consumer Electronics Show, the service aims to complement subscription video on demand services for cord cutters, offering a selection of major cable channels that can be streamed through smart TVs, digital media players and apps. Moreover, Sling TV is now debuting with its slim bundled services freed from cable and satellite subscription, like its offers of about 20 channels for \$20 a month. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, alongside with Sling TV, Apple Inc. is also in talks with television programmers, including Fox, CBS and ABC, to offer a slimmed-down bundle of about 25 channels (Hagey, Ramachandran and Wakabayashi). The Apple declines to officially comment on this, however, the plan seems primed to offer a new web television service in the fall of 2015, in combination with the launch of the new version of Apple TV - a digital media player and a micro console developed and sold by Apple Inc. Even though for now it is simply a rumour, the potentially disruptive effects of this “seismic move” as *The Guardian* describes it, are enough to heat up debates between media professionals, incumbent distributors and broadcasters (Rushe 2015).

In fact, these new skinny bundles are a double-edged sword. On one side, they might further enhance the disaggregation of television content distribution favouring the entrance of new players in the distribution market, as well as providing an appealing solution for the cord-cutting counterpublic and in general for “a generation of people who, when it comes to television, want to get what they want exactly when they want it” (Wu 2015). On the other side though, “those who predicted that the Internet would kill the bundle may have spoken too soon” (Wu 2015). In fact, through these neo-skinny bundles, new Internet television providers like Sling TV and Apple TV are basically growing their own bundled packages, slimmer and cheaper, but still bundles (Wu 2015). Moreover, although the offer of skinny bundles by cable operators like Verizon is marketed as a way of giving the viewers what they want, in the end, what they propose is mostly a compromise through which cable operators can maintain some of their economic advantages derived from bundling, while both reducing the power of content producers, while at the same time containing the cord-cutting phenomenon.

Alongside the aforementioned strategies of diversified offers, incumbent delivery platforms are also implementing cross-industry collaborations and vertical integration strategies to adjust their

product, “sports is rightly considered television’s most resilient asset when it come to the forces of digital video recorders and cord-cutting” (Strangelove 2015, 75).

practices and business structure to the changing environment. By doing this, television distribution platforms have increasingly tightened their interrelations with other companies, both inside and outside the traditional television industry (Evans 47). To form strategic relationships is nothing new, especially for the development of new television services. As noted by scholars for some time, the U.S. television industry is comprised of many different industries intertwined into a world of “willed affinity” (Caldwell 2004, 45). John Caldwell suggests that “this affinity stands as a convenient common” for the broadcasting industry on which strategic collaboration and partnerships are based in order to guarantee stable markets and economies of scale (2004, 45). The idea of industrial relationships based on “willed affinity” is also applicable in the specific case of the television distribution platforms whose system is today based on a structural aggregation of three industries: the telecommunication, the television and the Internet industries (Sanjoy 2011, 4).

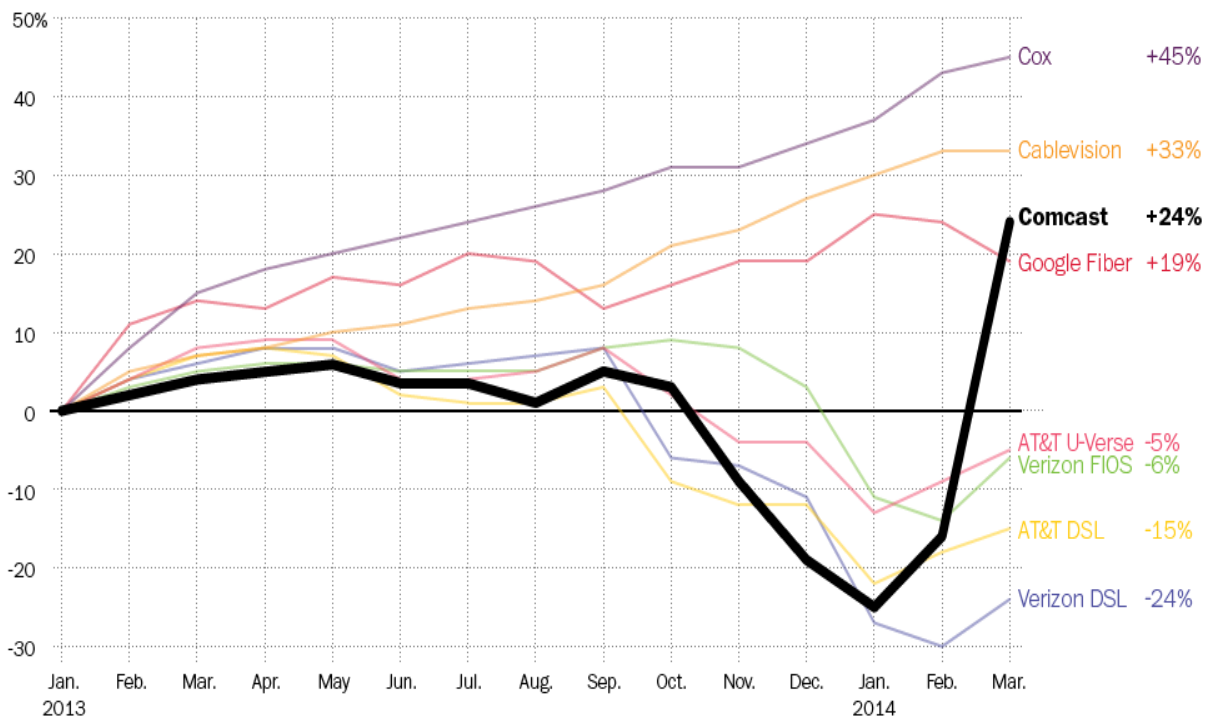
Since the first decade of the 2000s, incumbent delivery platforms have sought to enhance such structural aggregation through various cross-industry collaborations also aimed at re-capturing the growing numbers of viewers who turned to the Internet as their primary source of television content. A significant example of this response is given by Hulu, a premium and ad-supported streaming television service, legally accessible only in the United States. This online service offers a selection of TV shows, clips, movies, trailers and more para-textual content on the free Hulu.com service and the Hulu subscription service. Founded in 2008, the meteoric rise of Hulu over a three-year period is well-documented, although in real terms it ranked a distant second-placed in the US market behind Google/YouTube in the comScore Video Metrix rankings for March 2012 (Cunningham and Silver 2013, 91). Nevertheless, between the various television streaming services in the entertainment business, none come close to the market share of online audiences gained by Hulu and Netflix (Strangelove 2015, 145). In particular, while Netflix is the top provider of streamed films, Hulu is the main provider of online television shows (Gara 2013). Besides the popularity of Hulu though, what is striking and relevant for the purpose of my study is that this television service is a joint venture between Comcast NBC–Universal, Fox and ABC–Disney, and “represents the incumbent TV networks major-play in the online video space” (Cunningham and Silver 2013, 91). In fact, Time Warner, AMC Networks, CBS or HBO all have their own video streaming services aimed at capturing those online viewers and cord-cutters that are leaking outside the traditional system, however, their success is quite limited. By contrast, the joint venture of Hulu offers a cross-industry service with a wider variety of choices that includes HBO series as well as other major cable and non-cable programs. In conclusion, Hulu shows how the incumbent television distribution pipelines are implementing cross-industry collaborations with broadcasters and other major players to satisfy the growing ranks of online audience and cord-cutters.

Another major way the industry circumvents the cutters concerns so-called vertical integration strategies that can take the form of partnerships, acquisitions or mergers among incumbent firms (Strangelove 2015, 175). For television distribution platforms like cable operators, the question of vertical integration relates to the decision of expanding ‘upwards’ and/or ‘downwards’ along the television distribution chain. In the case of U.S. cable operators, we witnessed various cases of vertical integration, in which on the one hand, cable TV companies establish strategic partnerships acquiring a majority stake in certain broadcasting networks, therefore ending up carrying networks that they own - completely or partially. A quite controversial example this is given by the merger between Comcast and NBC Universal. In this regard, in 2011 Comcast, the largest U.S. cable and internet provider, acquired majority stake in the media conglomerate NBC Universal from General Electric (GE), until March 2013 when GE divested its stake allowing Comcast to complete its acquisition. In this way, the company obtained quite a unique position since Comcast/NBCU can produce content, sell cable subscription and sell Internet connections. Not satisfied by this already extremely powerful position, in 2014 Comcast announced its \$45 billion merger with Time Warner Cable (Mahler 2015). The two telecommunications giants proposed to create a single operator that would have acquired even greater control over the content production and distribution, dominating up to two-thirds of U.S. Internet connections and cable television (Thielman 2015). However, exactly when the focus of the merger shifted towards broadband, Comcast’s “ambitions were sunk” (Mahler 2015) due to the increasing pressure of regulators, media corporations and activists on the Net Neutrality issue.

As previously explained, in the fight for Net Neutrality consumers and especially cord-cutters have huge interests at stake, and this realization came also through various controversial cases of discriminatory behaviours demonstrated between, on one side, the cable operators, and on the other, the emerging OTT television providers. In fact, ending net neutrality would enable cable companies and internet connection provider to offer higher speeds of service for higher prices, allowing big companies to buy their way into fast lane, while leaving everyone else in the slow lane (Oliver 2014). To this regard, in 2014 Comcast and Netflix were actually negotiating on this differentiation of service, finally announcing an agreement in which Netflix would have paid Comcast for faster and more reliable access to Comcast’s subscribers (Wyatt and Cohen 2014). While discussing this move, in his show *Last Week Tonight* John Oliver showed a graphic of the speed of Netflix videos on Comcast’s pipelines before and after it had negotiated a deal for faster service, comparing it to a “mob shakedown” (Oliver 2014). In fact, as the graph shows (see fig. 3.3), in the last months of 2013 Netflix’s speed service went drastically down, whereas it started to

increase again only after February 2014. Coincidentally, Netflix closed the deal with Comcast exactly in February 2014.

Fig. 3.3 The graph below show is based on data gathered from the Netflix ISP Speed Index that is a measure of prime time Netflix performance on a particular ISP. The line chart highlights the percentage of change in Netflix download speed through the major U.S. internet service providers from January 2013 till March 2014. It clearly shows the drastic drop-off that happened during Comcast-Netflix negotiations, followed by a significant increase after the deal between the two companies was made (Ehrenfreund 2014).



Finally, cable operators and other incumbent distribution platforms can also potentially expand their reach downwards in the distribution chain, through mergers, acquisitions or partnerships with backbone Internet providers, as in the case of Verizon and MCI. Backbone internet providers “provide transport and routing services for information packets among high speed hubs on the Internet” (Economides 2005, 4), thus, they can be defined as the principal data routes between large, strategically interconnected computer networks and core routers on the Internet. ISPs participate in Internet backbone exchange traffic by privately negotiated interconnection agreements, primarily governed by the principle of settlement-free peering. In 2006, under previous approval by the FCC (Federal Communication Commission 2005), Verizon Communications closed its acquisition deal of the long-distance carrier MCI, “turning itself into a major backbone provider in its own right” (Lee 2014). By acquiring one of the biggest Internet backbones, Verizon increased

the concentration and aggregation within the broadband markets, acquiring higher power leverage over other backbone providers like Cogent, and in turn over, the emerging OTT television services. In the end though, online audiences such as the cord-cutting counterpublic are also influenced by these shifts in the power interplay of the television distribution platforms, since their much-vaunted freedom from any constraints is very much at stake in an ever-more contracted broadband market. In this sense, incumbent distributors are circumventing the cord-cutting counterpublic by morphing those same cords into wireless signals (Smith 2015) and shifting the focus of their power on broadband. In conclusion, looking at how the landscape is evolving, cord-cutters are faced with a reality check: their symbolic power has help trigger broader political economic dynamics that are morphing the television ecosystem, although not always as they were expecting – or at least hoping.

3.2.2. Cross-Platform Distribution in A Connected Viewing System

Viewers' increasing desire for multimedia and multiplatform services goes alongside with the technological developments that are changing the way of distributing and accessing television content. Actually, we are witnessing an impending revolution in how television and audiovisual content in general is consumed and circulated that “relates to a larger trend across the media industries to integrate digital technologies and socially networked communication with traditional screen media practices” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 1). Media scholars Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson described this trend as “connected viewing” (2013), a term that points to “a more fundamental shift in the current media ecosystem, a process in which the various strands of convergence culture have become more fully integrated into the institutional regulatory and cultural forces currently shaping media industries worldwide” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 4). As Holt and Sanson further argue, no other medium has received as much attention in the connected viewing context as television, since its business models and structures have been significantly affected by the migration of viewers to mobile multiple screens (Holt and Sanson 2013, 4). Indeed, much like the advent of cable, the remote control, or the digital video recorder, today's shift towards a cross-platform televisual experience through digital technologies, mobile devices and multimedia screens, is challenging industry and academia alike “to grapple with long-held truism about the medium as a business, techno-cultural form, and cultural object” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 4).

The television distribution platforms have attempted to respond to emerging nondomestic reception sites and new online audience practices like cord-cutting by embracing the connected viewing paradigm. Indeed, we are witnessing a migration towards multi- and cross-platform in the business strategies of distributors. This trend has been labelled in various ways, such as ‘transmedia

distribution' (Evans 2014), '360-degree commissioning' (Bennett and Strange 2008; Parker 2007), or 'media matrix' (Curtin 2009), but essentially it means that the television distribution industry does not simply think in terms of linear television anymore, but it is expanding its realm to a wide range of delivery possibilities opened up by digital technologies. By doing this, the industry practice is attempting to position television within "the wider digital culture of matrix media and multiple windows, producing understanding of television as digital media as a complex interplay of sites, screen, technologies, industries, economies, aesthetics, national and global contexts, domestics and public viewing spaces, citizenship and consumers functions community and fragmentation, as well as new and established productions, user and audiences practices" (Bennet and Strange 2011, 5). Thus, cross-platform and media convergence strategies in the distribution system are inscribed within the larger redefinition of television, and they can be interpreted in light of the currently shifts in how television is consumed and experienced by disruptive audience practices like those of the cord-cutting counterpublic.

Cross-platform distribution strategies imply the combination of online and offline delivery platforms with the aim of reaching and engaging a wider array of viewers with television content. To do so, incumbent distributors can either rely on other independent platforms, or they can horizontally integrate in order to offer their services on online platform that they directly own. A well-known example of the latter strategy is the so-called "*TV Everywhere*." *TV Everywhere* is the label given to the phenomenon of horizontal integration, content aggregations, and the offline/online bundling strategies of MPVDs and ISPs (Waterman, Sherman, and Wook Ji 2012, 3). The concept of *TV Everywhere* was jointly announced in 2009 by the two largest U.S. cable operators, Comcast and Time Warner. This strategy consists in creating an umbrella model in which a cable system, or other MVPD, offers certain television programming online for free, with the "authentication" that the online user is a paid monthly subscriber of the cable provider (Waterman, Sherman, and Wook Ji 2012, 20). To reduce the increasing market power of OTT television services, and re-gain their competitive advantage, cable operators expand their reach by creating their privately-owned online distribution platforms. Moreover, *TV Everywhere* can be interpreted as a price discrimination device in which "low value" consumers are offered online television content for free in order to decrease the probability that they will switch to other OTT providers or more or less legal online platforms, and in this sense, "it is designed to prevent offline subscribers from cutting the cord" (Waterman, Sherman, and Wook Ji 2012, 25).

Since 2009 the *TV Everywhere* strategy rapidly spread through the incumbent television distribution platforms, in fact, as the table below shows, by 2012 almost all the largest U.S. MVPDs, including Comcast, DirecTV, Dish, Cox Communications, AT&T and Verizon, offer such

services, whereas the availability of *TV Everywhere* becomes less likely among relatively small MVPDs (see fig. 3.4). *Xfinity*, the online aggregation service owned by Comcast, is one of the most popular and has quite a wide offer of channels, from TNT to other Turner Broadcasting System channels (Waterman, Sherman, and Wook Ji 20). Users can either access this programming through the *Xfinity* portal, or through the web pages of the specific channels, however, the condition *sine qua non* to access such service is to pay a cable subscription. Thus, whereas the push for *TV Everywhere* addresses many of the cord-cutters' problems and needs, such as the desire for multimedia and multiplatform services, in the end, the cutters are aware of its limitations and they commonly considers it as "a warmed-over attempt at a pseudo-Netflix streaming service" (Glaser 2012). Indeed, as "The Cord-Cutters Manifesto" ironically states, "forcing people to pay for cable in order to get "TV Everywhere online is like forcing people to buy horse and buggies to get a new car in the early 20th century" (Glaser 2012).

Fig. 3.4 The table shows the taxonomy of the *TV Everywhere* services offered by some of the major U.S. cable and satellite provider as of June 2012 (Waterman, Sherman, and Wook Ji 2012, 22)

<u>Rank</u>	<u>MVPD</u>	<u>Subscribers</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Operator</u>	<u>TV Everywhere Business Model</u>	<u>Channels</u>
1	Comcast Corporation	22,343,000	Xfinity	Self	Free Access to Package Level	Expansive
2	DirecTV	19,880,000	DirecTV Everywhere	Mixed: uses some Network portals	Free Access to Package Level	Limited
3	Dish Network	13,967,000	Dish Online	Self	Free Access to Package Level	Expansive
4	Time Warner Cable	12,061,000	TWC TV	Self	n/a, limited live TV only	N/A, by area
5	Cox Communications	4,761,000	Cox TV Online	Self	Free Access to Package Level	Limited
6	Charter Communications	4,325,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	none
7	Verizon Communications	4,173,000	FiOS TV Online	Unclear: Snyacor relationship exists	Free Access to Package Level	Expansive
8	AT&T	3,791,000	U-verse	Self	Free Access to Package Level	Expansive
9	Cablevision Systems Corporation/Optimum	3,250,000	iO TV	Self	Free Access to Package Level	N/A, by area

Alongside the big cable giants, satellite television companies like Dish Network and Direct TV have also implemented cross-platform strategies in the wake of *TV Everywhere*. In this regard, of particular relevance are the efforts made by Dish Network to expand in the online television business. The company started by offering *Dish Online*, an on-demand content service offering movies and TV shows, that viewers could watch both on a ‘TV’ set and ‘on-the-go’ via mobile phone, computer, laptop or tablets (Dishanywhere.com 2015). *Dish Online*, though, was not fundamentally different from the other MPDVs’ *TV Everywhere* services. A more innovative and potentially disruptive service offered by Dish Network came instead at the beginning of 2015 when the company launched Sling TV. Sling TV aims to complement its subscription video-on-demand services with this online television service that offers a good selection of major cable channels without requiring any cable subscription. It currently streams 20 ‘live’ cable channels, including ESPN, AMC, TBS, Food Network, IFC, CNN, Cartoon Network and the Disney Channel. This \$20-per-month, no-contract video-streaming service runs on multimedia devices, from smart TVs, set-top boxes, to computers and mobile phones (About.dish.com 2015). Moreover, Sling TV runs as an app on PCs and Macs, iOS and Android devices, Amazon Fire TV (box and stick), the Xbox One, and recent Roku devices, including Roku TVs. In a nutshell, Sling TV appears ostensibly aimed at the cord-cutting counterpublic. Indeed, in various blogs, cord-cutting guides and website, Sling TV is described as “the cable TV for cord-cutters” (Captain 2015) since it is the first service to offer a cord-cutter’s alternative to premium cable packages, combined also with a multimedia and multi-platform service.

The cord-cutting counterpublic is becoming an increasingly appealing – and simultaneously frightening - audience not only to cable television or satellite providers, but even for content producers and broadcasters. Concerning the latter, although they are not the focus of my analysis, it is worth mentioning that broadcasters are also implementing horizontal integration, content aggregation, and offline/online bundling strategies to capture the growing number of viewers that are circumventing the television system. For instance, the American premium cable network HBO launched its *TV Everywhere* service *HBO Go* that has rapidly become the cord-cutters’ ‘holy grail’, because it allows HBO subscribers access to all of its movies and original programs, on demand, and moreover, soon it might be available even without cable (Moylan 2014). The service is owned by Time Warner subsidiary Home Box Office Inc., even though Time Warner chief executive Jeff Bewkes hinted that in the near future consumers who only pay for high-speed internet will be able to buy subscriptions to *HBO Go* without having cable at all (Moylan 2014), technically those cord-cutters will still receive their internet service from one of their hated cable television giants.

In conclusion, whereas decisions of cross-platform and offline/online distribution strategies are aimed at responding to the desire for multimedia television services expressed by viewers like the cord-cutters, at the same time, these industry responses are inevitably shaped by the potential to generate consumer value and returns via a number of distribution outlets (Doyle 2). Indeed, as the examples previously presented showed us, often these strategies re-propose certain established industry practices in the attempt to maintain a sufficient level of protection and control over the flow of television content across geographies (Strangelove 2015, 182). Hence, the “scarcity-creating system” that is the paramount for an oligopolistic distribution is only partially disrupted by the proliferation of different delivery options and cross-media distribution platforms, because these innovative strategies also make use of established industry practices, like windowing and geo-blocking, that tend to re-adjust the “scarcity-creating system” to the changing television environment.²⁵

3.2.3. Cross-Media Audience Engagement

The previously discussed paradigm of “connected viewing” (Holt and Sanson 2013) and its relative multimedia and cross-platform strategies created an expanding array of opportunities for audiences to reconnect with one another and to engage with television content. Cloud-based *TV Everywhere* services are one example for these competing dynamics, as they simultaneously sell the ability to “disconnect from the television set, along with the promise of constant connectivity and instantaneous access” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 7). This promise of constant connectivity and instantaneous access is a key issue for the cord-cutting counterpublic that strives for watching whatever they, whenever they want and on whatever device (Glaser 2012). To this regard actually, Holt and Sanson argue that the growth of multimedia services, platforms and devices has undoubtedly encouraged cord-cutting, “as the home cable connection becomes less necessary with the expanding platforms of digital streaming and video-on-demand available on laptops and mobile devices” (2013, 8). From this perspective, the cord-cutting counterpublic has augmented and influenced the phenomenon of connected viewing because “all those viewers who are “disconnected” from their cable subscriptions still need a place to get their content” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 8), and increasingly, that place is online and on mobile screens.

²⁵ Windowing and geo-blocking can allow a top-down controlled time and space cross-platform distribution that is still profitable for the incumbent television distribution platforms. Traditionally, windowing is the process that sees a television show, or a film, released in the U.S. market first and then gradually appears in other countries at a later date; with cross-platform distribution strategies, windowing though involves also isolating content on various delivery means at different time.

Within this scenario, cord-cutting behaviours should be understood as one of those “cultural practices that have both fuelled the rise of these sharing technologies and evolved as people discover how these platforms might be used” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 11). Indeed, the efforts that television distribution platforms are putting into the creation of new forms of cross-media audience engagement, can be seen as responses to the increased online social connection and participation typical of the cord-cutting counterpublic. Second-screen content, social networking, mobile apps, cloud-based services and OTT technologies have all evolved to both provide content to and further engage the ever-growing niche audiences, like the cord-cutting counterpublic. To do so, television distribution platforms are leveraging what Malcom Gladwell defined as the “stickiness” of television content (2000). The “stickiness” broadly refers to the capacity of certain television content to attract audience attention and engender deep engagement. Gladwell suggests that, “there is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it” (2000, 132). And that is what broadcasters and television distribution platforms are trying to do. However, Jenkins, Green and Ford argue against this idea of ‘stickiness’ claiming that it is not simply about a quality of the content but more about what people do with the content. From their perspective, the ‘spreadability of media’ (2013) describes better the audience engagement with the content in the sense that viewers actively ‘spread’ word about the content they engage with via various online/offline platforms and media. In alignment with this argument, Napoli claims that the broad shift towards audience engagement and media impact is now driven more by the viewers’ experience rather than exposure (Napoli 2014). Thus, the industry tries to focus more on the viewing televisual experience as a whole, embracing the so-called ‘Experience Economy’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999), where the focus is on viewers’ commitment and involvement in engaging media experiences, rather than simply exposure to television content. These developments combined with a growing audience fragmentation and newfound viewing habits brought also producers, marketers and advertisers to shift their logic, meanwhile taking advantage of the ‘pull’ logics of the new platforms and social networking. In conclusion, we see that the answer to the increased online social participation and connection of viewers like the cutters implies changes not only in distribution practices, but in the larger television ecosystem.

Conclusion

The dynamics of resistance and resilience between the cutters and the television distribution platforms shows that the industry logic still heavily rely on the idea that peer-to-peer counter-forces like the cord-cutting counterpublic can be stopped or at least contain through the offering of

compelling alternatives (Strangelove 2015, 13). As I have discussed, to stop the leakage the television distribution platforms are implementing various strategies both to answer their changing needs and requests, as well as, to circumvent them and maximize their profit in today's digital convergent system. Yet the rise of an access-oriented and sharing consumer cultures, where people pay not to own something but to access a copy of what they want, when they want, and on whatever device they want, emphasizes that the responses of the industry to the cord-cutting counterpublic's motivational drivers may also prove ineffective in the long run since new and more appealing ways of circumventing the system constantly emerge.

4

Conclusion

Who Is Disrupting Who?

After the analysis and exploration of the drivers underlying the cord-cutting counterpublic, and the relative responses of the television industry platforms, in this final chapter I will relate the motivational drivers and the industry's responses to argue how the industrial practices are actually attempts at compromise...and completely detrimental to the cord-cutters. By doing so, I will present a concluding discussion, over-viewing the findings of my work, reflecting on the specificities of the cord-cutting counterpublic and its symbolic power, and discussing what the dynamics of resistance and resilience between the cutters and the television distribution platform mean for the current redefinition of television.

4.1. Concluding Remarks on the Cord-Cutting Counterpublic

Technological developments, shifts in television audience practices and the re-working of the television industry in the era of digital convergence have stimulated “a debate over whether we are witnessing ‘the end of television’ ” (Starks 2013, 135). Today, many critics proclaim the end of ‘TV,’ as in the end of the classical form of television, and speak of multiple transformations that are leading to the disruption of the identity of television once stabilized in the popular culture and now called into question (Keilbach and Stauff 2013, 79). With ever-greater choice, audiences are fragmenting, customizing their televisual experience via time- and space-shifting technologies and personalizing their television menu to watch whatever they want, whenever they want on whatever screen they have available. Industry and academics alike are struggling to grasp these on-going changes and to recognize the medium's current heterogeneity from television as it used to be. These developments in production, distribution and consumption practices, combined with the spread of the Internet and new digital technologies, have offered “those on the margins effective ways of

circumventing and even undermining top-down concentrated television industries” (Uricchio 2006, 65). The cord-cutters are between ‘those people on the margins.’ Indeed, the question of the cable cord-cutting phenomenon is emerging in the midst of these developments, and the cord-cutters’ revolution should be actually understood as symptomatic of this larger redefinition of television and of those viewers’ behaviours formerly known as ‘TV watching.’

The cord-cutting phenomenon concerns the newfound watching behaviours that induce certain viewers to snip their cable cord, dropping pay-TV services and seeking for alternative ways of accessing television content such as OTT television providers and more or less legal streaming/downloading services. These viewers attempt to circumvent the established television system and its calcified institutional and legal norms that are constraining their televisual experience. The cord-cutting counterpublic is often prophetically announced as the ‘scariest television’s generation,’ (Strangelove 2015, 94) that is enhancing the Internet’s disruptive potential of undermining the medium once known as television. “They say, it’s a new distribution paradigm! IP delivery breaks the cable stronghold! The great unbundling, the Internet grail of consumer choice is undermining the control of traditional distributors and producers!” (Wolff 2014). However, from the dynamics of resistance and resilience between cutters and the television distribution platforms analysed in my work, the situation appears to be more nuanced than that. Actually, a mutually transforming effect is emerging, and we could argue that in certain cases, television is in fact disrupting the Internet.

This mutually transforming effect emerges from the various discursive conceptions of the cutters explored in my work. The cord-cutting counterpublic has drawn the attention of media professionals, television industry, regulators and academics alike. Each of these main constituencies constructed a discursive conception of the cord-cutters that sheds light on certain facets, contributing to the cultural and social framing of this fast-developing phenomenon that I have presented. Common to the four discourses is the use of ubiquitous melodramatic modes of emplotment that often emphasizes the ‘drama’ of the cutters. Moreover, the various modes of emplotment generally take up two different layers that cut cross all the discursive conceptions: a cultural and a political economic layer.

On the cultural level, cord-cutters are depicted as empowered and proactive viewers who are culturally and socially re-shaping the future of television. In this sense, the cutters themselves enhance their perception as empowered and techno-savvy viewers who seek mobile, multimedia and customizable televisual experiences. In other words, they are embracing the connected viewing paradigm (Holt and Sanson 2013), and even accelerating the processes behind it. This view is also shared by those media professionals and industry spokesmen that I defined as ‘supporters’ of the

cord-cutters, who tend to envision them as the future of television, young and proactive consumers whose changing needs can now be answered by the new Internet and OTT television service providers that can offer them what they wish, when they want and on whatever device (Hasting 2015). In this sense, the cord-cutters are a force that is carefully watched and listened to in order to find possibilities of containment of their potentially disruptive effects. A similar approach is taken also by media regulators, who pinpoint the common necessity of regulators, broadcasters, distributors and internet providers to act according to those changing needs and viewing behaviours that are emblemized by the cord-cutting counterpublic (Federal Communication Commission 2015). Finally, such discursive conceptions of the cutters as empowered viewers can be framed within the broader academic discourses around the increased user agency, and the nuanced shifts in power and control on the television experience endorsed by processes of media digital convergence.

On the other hand, there is a political economic level wherein the understanding of the cutters is used in a stricter relation to the economic re-structuring of the television distribution platforms and the relative legislations. Within this scenario, the cord-cutters' discursive conception is based on different ways of casting the specific utterances of the various constituencies at perception and their interests at stake. In general terms, I noticed a tendency towards the depiction of the cord-cutters as a fringe resistance movement consciously aware of industry logics and skilfully able to circumvent the incumbent television platforms and their calcified institutional norms. The motivational drivers behind this movement are then portrayed in more or less ideological terms according to the specific constituency.

Firstly, from the cord-cutters' perspective, they tend to create an idea of themselves as bearers of a 'silent revolution' (Inglehart 1977) against a top-down concentrated television industry that force-feeds viewers with overpriced and constraining bundled packages. The conception expressed by the television industry and media professionals takes up a different point of view. Once the growth of the cord-cutters clearly dismantled the position of the deniers, certain industry representative started depict the cutters as a threat for the future of television, as rebellious digital pioneers whose 'free-content-anywhere' attitudes represented "television's scariest generation" (Strangelove 2015, 94). Media regulators do not openly use such drastic and dramatic tones, but to a certain extent they also perceive the cord-cutters as a rebellion that is taking active part in a broader media contestation related to current media policy matters like Net Neutrality and Open Access. Both the television industry representatives and media regulators use the cord-cutters, and online audiences in general, as sites of investigation producing knowledge, business and regulatory strategies. By doing so, the discursive constructions of the cord-cutting audience allow the calculation of risk and therefore the possibility of containment of the major shifts brought by this

counterpublic. Finally, academic discourse is more nuanced and detached, and it broadly explores the question of the cutter within the fundamental question of control in this ‘post-TV world.’ Indeed, as D’Agostino and Tafler noted about the new post-television culture, there always remains a question of control because “who controls the tools often determines the nature of the system put in place” (1994, xvii). This is a particularly crucial and controversial point as the symbolic power of the cord-cutting counterpublic is entering – and altering - this dimension of power and control in the television distribution industry.

In conclusion, every discursive conception of the cutters adds a different shade, using the various perspectives of the four main constituencies to help us in understanding this multifaceted phenomenon. However, within this scenario what is missing is a broader conceptualization of how the cord-cutting phenomenon could be theoretically and culturally framed. To provide for this lack, I have advanced the conceptualization of the cord-cutting phenomenon as a burgeoning generational counterpublic. Using as starting points the works of Nancy Fraser (1992) and Michael Warner (2002) on the notion of public and counterpublic, we see that the features and principles of a ‘subaltern counterpublic’ are applicable also to the fringe audience of the cord-cutters. The cord-cutting counterpublic is indeed self-organized, in the sense that it started with the changing audience reception practices, and came into existence by virtue of being addressed by various media outlets. It is based on a relation among strangers whose interconnections and interactions are based on a vast array of media platforms, and it can be considered as a multi-contextual space of circulation of information and entertainment, organized not by a place or an institution, but by the audience practices and the circulation of discourse itself. This discursive entity could “serve as a free-floating signifier for the playing out of competing conceptions of the threat/potential” (Uricchio and Pearson 1994, 2) of the current and fast-developing shifts addressed in my research.

Given these features I have argued that the cord-cutting counterpublic presents a symbolic power that is raising an alternative, if not oppositional, vision of television and audience practices that challenges the stabilized notion of television. In other words, the symbolic power of this counterpublic lies in the cutters’ silent resistance against a top-down calcified television ecosystem. In conclusion, such resistance movement is now morphing into a broader cultural and social shift, affecting the larger redefinition of television’s every facet, i.e. as a techno-cultural form, an institution, an industry, a programming practice and audience practice.

4.2. Slipping ‘Outside’ the Television Industry, But to Which Extent?

As I previously argued, the symbolic power of the cord-cutting counterpublic is inducing disproportionate reactions in the television industry, affecting especially the dimension of power and control between the television distribution platforms. To better understand this point, I will now bridge the motivational drivers of cord-cutting behaviours with the more or less correspondent reactions in the industrial practice.

Firstly, from the analysis it emerges that the major driver for viewers to cut the cable cord is what I defined ‘the desire to be freed from any constraints.’ This ideal category is fundamentally related to the cutters’ demand of having more control over their own televisual experience, which in turn is expressed as a wide need for ‘freedom’ intended as freedom from paying for television content, freedom from restricted choices and freedom from bundled services. This motive conceals an economic-driven rationale that prompts viewers to drop their cable television subscription for a more customizable and cheaper television menu with no ‘pollution’ of any sort (Jacobs 2011). In a nutshell, they want more for less, and they are fed-up with force-fed bundled packages with hundreds of channels that do not interest them. However, this desire of the cord-cutting counterpublic to de-bundle goes also beyond economic hardship. Indeed, it is also related to a more fundamentally ideological request of cutters to fight the corporate power of the television distribution industry and its established practices, like the well-known triple (or double) play.

In response to this multifaceted category, the incumbent television distribution platforms are implementing various strategies to satisfy such motivational drivers, and at the same time, to hedge their bets and contain the growing cord-cutting counterpublic. Strategies like diversification of the offer through ‘skinny bundles,’ or the creation of innovative delivery platforms like Hulu, are officially aimed at answering the need for personalized television menu, giving viewers more freedom of choice as well as control over their televisual experience. However, the other side of the coin shows that the market of television distribution platforms is undergoing a structural aggregation of power in the hands of few U.S. cable giants. This aggregation is promoted by those strategies like cross-industry collaborations, vertical integration and strategic partnerships, that television distributors implement to protect their market power and circumvent those viewers who are ‘leaking’ outside the established system.

Finally, incumbent distributors are still not willing to give up profitable and successful established strategies, like triple play or bundling; on the contrary, these industrial practices are

strengthened to contain the cutters' leakage by leveraging the viewers' craving for broadband connections. In particular, it appears that incumbent television distribution platforms are morphing those same cable cords into wireless signals (Smith 2015). In other words, they are horizontally integrating in the Internet business, shifting the focus of their power interplay on the broadband connection, since that is what viewers are interested in nowadays. As Pivot TV president Shapiro sarcastically declared, "people under 30s would rather have broadband than sex" (2014), and those people under 30s are television's future generation. In this sense, the cord-cutting counterpublic and their newfound viewing behaviours are so carefully watched and listened to that the effects of their symbolic power have helped trigger controversial macro-dynamics in the dimension of power and control within television and the Internet. Thus, the increasing use of broadband connection is a double edge sword for both consumers and the television distribution industry. On the one hand the Internet has both broken the distribution bottleneck allowing the proliferation of new online television platforms, as well as, offered "those on the margins effective ways of circumventing and even undermining top-down concentrated television industries" (Uricchio 2006, 65). On the other hand though, the fact that users are increasingly dependent upon broadband connection gives leverage to the owners of those pipelines, which in the U.S. market often coincide with the major cable television companies. In this way, the oligopolistic playground of U.S. cable companies has been extended into the Internet business.

Moreover, the shift of focus of television business practices towards broadband connection is further endorsed by the reactions of the industry to the viewers' desire for multimedia and cross-platform services. The much-vaunted mantra of watching what you wish, whenever you want and on whatever device is available emerges as a strong motivational driver to 'shave' if not directly cut the cable cord. In response, a growing number of MPVDs and ISPs are implementing *TV Everywhere* strategies based often on offline/online bundling strategies. In this way, incumbent television distribution platforms are competing with Internet and OTT providers to recapture those online audiences like the cord-cutting counterpublic. Thus, the effects of the symbolic power of the cord-cutting counterpublic have increased the complexities and controversies between cable television giants, ISPs and emerging OTT television providers. In this sense, a more nuanced vision on the impacts of online audience practices needs to be developed.

It is a common belief that a key component of disruption is to create a wide menu of on-demand choices, "undermining the media establishment's power to make the consumer buy dross as well as gold" (Wolff 2014). "They say, the great unbundling, the Internet grail of consumer choice is undermining the control of traditional distributors and producers!" (Wolff 2014). However, to what extent? Or on the contrary, as writer and journalist Michael Wolff poignantly argues, could it

be that these cross-media digital services and online options “join broadcast and cable as a third way the television industry can deliver its product, actually strengthening it?” (Wolff 2014). By exploring the dynamics of resistance and resilience between cord-cutters and the television distribution industry, I have noticed a mutually transforming effect. In other words, it is not a one-way relation where the ever-greater convergence of television, digital media and the Internet is disrupting the notion of television and the established industrial practices, but the situation appears to be more complex than that. Indeed, on one side, the classical idea of ‘TV’ that was once stabilized in the popular imagination is undergoing a redefinition enhanced by the changing viewing behaviours and the techno-cultural shifts brought by proactive viewers like the cord-cutting counterpublic. On the other side though, television as an industry practice has proven to be resilient and capable of re-adjusting itself to the changing environment. I would actually argue that this resilience has proven to be detrimental for the cutters, and online audiences in general, since it appears that in certain cases is television that is disrupting the “Internet grail for consumers” (Wolff 2014). We are witnessing a major shift of focus of the television distribution industry towards broadband connection and its pipelines, which may have further controversial effects on the power interplay, on the neutrality of Internet and on open access rights. Indeed, these reactions, combined with the ever-greater convergence of the television and Internet industries, are influencing the present viability and realization of Net Neutrality as a legal standard for broadband regulation.

However, the most conscious side of the cord-cutting counterpublic is aware of the double-logic of such industry responses, and this bitter awareness actually strengthens a deeper category of motivational drivers that I labelled as ‘moral superiority complex.’ In this case, we are dealing with a more personal, and in certain case ideological rational that has its deep roots in the changing attitudes and cultural values expressed by the cord-cutters. Raising themselves above those viewers who are still stuck with the traditional means of television access, and considering themselves as television’s future generation, they feel the pressure of bearing the ‘silent revolution’ that could potentially disrupt both the classical and old-fashioned idea of ‘TV,’ as well as the institutionalized norms and calcified structures of the television system. In this sense, they are profoundly touched by the current power dynamics between the television and Internet industries that is threatening the net neutrality and open access, and in turn affecting their much-desired ‘freedom.’

In conclusion, the analysis of dynamics of resistance and resilience between the television distribution platforms and the cord-cutting counterpublic enabled me to give a more nuanced vision of the effects of this counter-force on the notion of television and on the industry practices. From this perspective, it emerges that the symbolic power of the cutters has helped trigger broader political economic dynamics that are morphing the television ecosystem not as they were expecting

– or at least hoping. Therefore, the radical potential of the redefinition of television endorsed by the cutters has not yet been fulfilled, however, the symbolic power has prominently entered the historical struggle for control at the roots of television that “continues to this day and defines post-television culture as a battleground over content and audiences” (Strangelove 2015, 24).

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