Disruptions: For HBO, Still Beholden to a Cable Company

By NICK BILTON

Helen Sloan/HBO “Game of Thrones,” featuring Peter Dinklage, is one of many shows available on HBO Go only to cable subscribers with HBO. It is also known to be the most pirated TV show online week after week.

After cutting the cable TV cord two years ago, I’m often a bit late to the conversations about hot new shows. So last week, after hearing friends rave incessantly about “Game of Thrones,” I gave it a try.

Off I went to Apple iTunes, where I bought and downloaded the first season of the series for $29.

All I can say is: Wow! What an incredible show. I quickly made it through every episode of the first season and then went back to iTunes to buy Season 2, which concluded on HBO last week. But, the second season wasn’t there. It wasn’t available on Amazon either. Or via HBO.com.

It turns out, the only way to watch the second season is to reconnect my cable. HBO will stream the show free over a relatively new service called HBO Go, but only to cable subscribers with HBO.

I would rather have my head chopped off by The Hound than deal with a cable company again. No one but cable subscribers can get HBO Go, although most everyone knows that passwords are being shared with those who don’t have HBO.

I asked friends who have also cut the cord how they watched the second season. All of them said (in the flawed logic of a generation used to getting what it wants, when it wants it, thanks to technology) that they had no choice but to steal it. Not because they don’t want to pay for it, but because HBO Go isn’t an option.

It turns out they are not alone. There’s a Web site called “Take My Money, HBO!” where people who wish they could pay to watch HBO shows only online name their price. Jake Caputo, a designer who started the site on Tuesday, said 160,000 people visited in the first three days. The average price was $12 a month.

‘Game of Thrones’ is the most pirated TV show online every week,” said a blogger who goes by Ernesto Van Der Sar, editor of Torrent Freak, a site that reports on copyright and piracy news. “And people generally pirate TV shows like this because they can’t get it from other channels.”

The only way to stop piracy, he said, “is by making legal content easier to access and offering it at a reasonable price.”
Like $12 a month? If HBO made its streaming service available to consumers who don’t have cable, and just one million people were willing to pay, that’s an extra $12 million a month in revenue. (I personally would pay $25 a month for HBO Go.)

Cable subscribers pay about $18 a month for HBO on top of basic cable and other cable television packages. HBO receives about $8 of that, and cable companies take in the rest. So, in my way of thinking, HBO is forgoing $12 of revenue from every person who would never get cable and $4 from those who would give up cable and get just HBO.

Yet Eric Kessler, co-president of HBO, must have a different calculator in his office. “At this time, the economics simply don’t support a standalone HBO Go,” he said. “We make our programming, including ‘Game of Thrones,’ available on numerous platforms for our subscribers and then on DVD and electronic sell-through for those choosing not to subscribe to a TV provider.”

HBO told me that “Thrones” would be out on DVD in eight months, so I experimented with the piracy option, too. It took me all of 22 seconds to begin watching the latest episode through the illicit route of an online storage service and an illegal BitTorrent site. I get it. HBO has a great business model, and it will try to hang onto that model for as long as possible.

But technology doesn’t wait. People keep finding new ways to get what they want.

“It’s hard to stop piracy by creating laws, it’s better to ask why are people downloading these shows — that’s much more productive,” Mr. Van Der Sar said. “Downloading is already illegal. More laws are not going to help.”

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