

2012 Games Highlight an Olympic-Sized Problem for Fans

While competition is the name of the game for the 10,000 athletes competing in the Summer Olympics, the same can't be said for the viewing audience. In fact, the Olympics show what happens when viewers don't have enough options at their disposal.

For the first time ever, every single Olympic event is streaming live on the Web, and many events are available online on demand. But there's a catch: To watch online, you must be a cable or satellite subscriber.

Merely having a broadband connection isn't enough, because NBC isn't offering any options for stand-alone streaming. In the age of Internet video choice, many consumers are rightly outraged over being forced to sign up for a monthly service just to watch a sports event that occurs once every two years.

It's no coincidence that NBC, owned by cable giant Comcast, is keeping the Olympics behind a wall.

Even before Comcast purchased NBCUniversal, it was making moves to [strangle competition](#) (<http://gigaom.com/2010/09/11/comcasts-nbc-u-dreams-may-be-online-videos-nightmare/>) from online video alternatives — and searching for ways to stem the loss of customers who want to ditch ever-rising cable bills and exert more control over their viewing experience.

Couple that with the fact that the exclusive broadcasting rights to events like the Olympics are negotiated for exorbitant amounts of money, and a company like Comcast now has extra incentive to recoup its investment by holding its audience captive. Despite complaints about NBC's coverage of the Olympics, the network reportedly is still achieving its highest-ever ratings for the Games. Of course it is: People want to watch the Olympics. And even though [viewers are upset with NBC's coverage](#) (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/sports/olympics/nbc-olympics-delay-and-streaming-bring-complaints-on-twitter.html?_r=1) — to add insult to injury, the network is blacking out live events until they can be aired in primetime — there is nowhere else for people to turn.

In the United States, there is no changing the channel, no turning to a comparable online alternative, despite the fact that people in 64 other countries can watch the Olympics free and live

(<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/07/64-countries-around-the-world-can-watch-the-olympics-free-and-live-on-youtube-and-the-us-isnt-one-of-them/260494/>) on YouTube. U.S. viewers who

want to watch an event live and circumvent the NBC lockdown are forced to set up complicated — and sometimes illegal — systems to reroute their traffic to international servers.

NBC has held exclusive rights to the Summer Olympics since 1988, and its contract runs through 2020. We won't know what country will host the 2020 Games until September 2013, but we'll be stuck with NBC no matter what else happens.

When NBC knows it's the only place to see the events, and its real goal is to serve up viewers to its advertisers on a silver platter, what motivation does it have to provide a great viewing experience?

Indeed, NBC — and by extension, Comcast — is very comfortable operating in a monopoly environment.

The Olympics are just the latest example of what's gone wrong in our media landscape.

Instead of competing, the biggest cable companies are cozying up to each other in a united front against online video services. They're doing everything they can to ensure they serve as the only gateway to online video content.

Our nation's cable monopolists have a slew of weapons designed to turn consumers away from the Internet and into monthly cable subscriptions. Among their weapons of choice are [discriminatory data caps](http://www.freepress.net/resource/98581/kne-ecapping-future-comcasts-unjustified-internet-caps-and-plan-kill-video-competition), (<http://www.freepress.net/resource/98581/kne-ecapping-future-comcasts-unjustified-internet-caps-and-plan-kill-video-competition>) [sweetheart deals with their former telephone rivals](http://www.theverge.com/2011/12/2/2605408/cable-joint-venture-selling-3-6-billion-of-spectrum-to-verizon) (<http://www.theverge.com/2011/12/2/2605408/cable-joint-venture-selling-3-6-billion-of-spectrum-to-verizon>) and [efforts to put video content behind a walled garden](http://www.freepress.net/blog/12/05/01/no-more-hulu-you) (<http://www.freepress.net/blog/12/05/01/no-more-hulu-you>).

This dynamic is the direct result of policy decisions that have placed corporate interests ahead of the

public interest, giving media and Internet giants like Comcast the power to play by their own rules.

There are two years until the Sochi Winter Games. We can expect a repeat of 2012 unless the U.S. starts taking the competition problem seriously. If we continue to leave things up to the cable companies, it's only going to get worse for fans.