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Trapped into paying extra for cable sports

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A troglodyte of a team owner got his comeuppance this week for making incredibly stupid comments about race. But let's be clear.

Racism isn't widespread among sports team owners.

Greed is.

Exhibit A: The \$8 billion charged by the Dodgers for broadcast rights to their games knowing full well that pay-TV companies would have to pass along this sky-high cost to all customers.

Time Warner Cable is the Dodgers' partner in crime. It paid that whopping sum for exclusive rights to distribute the Dodgers channel to other pay-TV companies, assuming, like the team, that it would get away with sticking both fans and non-fans with an extra \$4 to \$5 fee every month.

The harsh reality, however, is that most Southern California pay-TV customers already are forking out big bucks for local sports that they may never watch.

Loren Price, 59, of Lake Elsinore noticed recently that the "regional sports fee" on his Verizon FiOS bill had jumped to \$3.48 a month from \$2.42 — a 44% increase.

The fee helps defray Verizon's cost for four channels in Southern California: Fox Sports West, Fox Sports Prime Ticket and Time Warner Cable's Lakers channel in both English and Spanish.

It doesn't include the more than \$5 monthly cost of ESPN, the nearly \$1 cost of the NFL Network, the roughly 40-cent charge of Fox College Sports, or any of the other sports channels that are packaged into most people's TV plans, regardless of whether they want them.

Sports channels account for roughly half of the average monthly pay-TV bill, according to industry estimates. And if you're not a sports fan, you're subsidizing those who are.

Price said he's a hockey fan and watches other sports only "if there's nothing else on." Being forced to pay for sports channels he doesn't want, he said, "is a waste of money."

I couldn't agree more. I'm not much of a sports fan myself, so I too waste big bucks on channels I neither want nor watch.

Jarryd Gonzales, a Verizon spokesman, said the FiOS regional sports fee is assessed "to address the skyrocketing incremental sports content costs associated with this popular programming."

DirecTV, the satellite company, introduced its own regional sports fee in 2012. It climbed this year to \$3.63 from \$3 a month, in large part to underwrite the added cost of the English- and Spanish-language Lakers channels.

A spokeswoman for Dish Network said the No. 2 satellite provider does not have a regional sports fee "at this time." A spokeswoman for AT&T said the company's U-verse service also doesn't charge a regional sports fee.

But just because such fees aren't broken out doesn't mean they're not on your bill.

I asked Dennis Johnson, a Time Warner Cable spokesman, whether the company levies a regional sports fee. He said it doesn't.

So I asked about the Lakers and Dodgers channels. How much do they cost subscribers?

"Our customers aren't charged for specific channels," Johnson replied. "The price of Time Warner Cable TV services reflects a package of channels, plus the technology and service necessary to deliver the service."

I got a different answer when I called Time Warner Cable customer service and asked where I could find the Lakers and

Dodgers channels on my bill.

A company rep answered that I couldn't find them because they're included in subscribers' digital packages. In other words, they're hidden.

I told the rep that I didn't want the two sports channels. Could she please delete them from my account?

The rep hung up. That's absolutely true. Ask my Times colleagues who were sitting nearby, snickering, as I sat there going, "Hello? Hello?"

I called Time Warner back and reached a different rep. I asked once again how much the Lakers and Dodgers channels cost me.

The rep said I'm not being charged for them at the moment because I'm still enjoying a special promotional rate. But when that promo rate ends next month, she said, my monthly bill will go up 23%.

Twenty-three percent. And much of that will be to cover the cost of two sports channels that I don't want and never watch.

Such runaway costs are a key factor in prompting a growing number of people to "cut the cord" and seek programming through online resources such as Netflix and Amazon.com.

A recent report from Experian Marketing Services found that about 7.6 million homes have abandoned pay-TV service while keeping high-speed Internet access. Other reports show that the younger and more wired a consumer is, the more likely it is that he or she will say adios to pay TV.

This is why DirecTV, Dish, Verizon and AT&T have balked at adding \$4 to \$5 to people's bills for a Dodgers channel.

"L.A. is already one of the world's most expensive places to watch sports, and networks like these encourage an even worse sense of entitlement by guaranteeing billions to teams without ever considering the financial burden to the pay-TV customer," said Robert Mercer, a DirecTV spokesman.

"Time Warner Cable's take-it-or-leave-it position is that everyone, including millions of non-Dodger fans, has to either bankroll their unprecedented Dodger deal or get shut out," he said.

I've long advocated for a la carte pricing — paying only for the channels you want. And I still believe that's the only equitable way to offer a service. Why should consumers be forced to pay for products they don't want?

Until we get there, though, it seems obvious that sports programming needs to be broken out into its own premium tier. Those who want sports can pay for it. Those who don't, won't.

This would have the added benefit of forcing team owners to stop being so money-grubbing. As long as they continue looking at fans

— and non-fans — as their personal ATM, they'll continue feeling free to drive ticket and licensing costs into the stratosphere.

Clippers owner Donald Sterling is paying the price for being a narrow-minded jerk.

Why should the Dodgers' owners get a pass?

David Lazarus' column runs Tuesdays and Fridays. He also can be seen daily on KTLA-TV Channel 5 and followed on [Twitter@Davidlaz](https://twitter.com/Davidlaz). Tips: david.lazarus@latimes.com.



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TIME WARNER CABLE is the Dodgers' partner in crime, seeking to stick customers with a big TV bill. Above, SportsNet L.A.'s John Hartung.