Disney fights streaming account sharing with help from cable industry

Enlarge / Here they come, all together in a streaming bundle.
Disney / Sam Machkovech

reader comments

158 with 115 posters participating

Share this story

Ars Guide to Online Security

View more stories

Disney and Charter Communications are teaming up to fight account sharing in an attempt to prevent multiple people from using a single account to access streaming video services.

The battle against account sharing was announced as Disney and the nation’s second-biggest cable company struck a new distribution agreement involving Disney’s Hulu, ESPN+, and the forthcoming Disney+. Customers could still buy those online services directly from Disney, but the new deal would also let them make those purchases through Charter’s Spectrum TV service.

If you buy a Disney service through Charter, be aware that the companies will work together to prevent you from sharing a login with friends. Disney and Charter said in their announcement yesterday that they have “agreed to work together

on piracy mitigation. The two companies will work together to implement business rules and techniques to address such issues as unauthorized access and password sharing."

In addition to streaming services, the deal will let Charter continue carrying Disney-owned TV channels on its cable service. That includes ABC, the various Disney and ESPN channels, FX, National Geographic, and more.

"This agreement will allow Spectrum to continue delivering to its customers popular Disney content, makes possible future distribution by Spectrum of Disney streaming services, and will begin an important collaborative effort to address the significant issue of piracy mitigation," Charter Executive VP Tom Montemagno said.

The announcement didn't say exactly how the companies will fight account sharing. We asked Charter for technical details on how it'll work and about whether this will result in more personal customer data being shared between Charter and Disney. Charter did not answer any of our questions, saying, "we don't have details to share at this time."

We sent the same questions to Disney and will update this article if we get any answers.

Charter CEO complained about account sharing

The crackdown could target people who use Charter TV account logins to sign into Disney services online. Charter CEO Tom Rutledge has complained about account sharing several times over the past few years while criticizing TV networks for not fully locking down their content.

"There's lots of extra streams, there's lots of extra passwords, there's lots of people who could get free service," Rutledge said at an industry conference in 2017. He argues

that password sharing has helped people avoid buying cable TV. ESPN has also complained about account sharing, calling it piracy.

Another possibility is that Charter could monitor usage of its broadband network to help Disney fight account sharing. For example, Disney could track the IP addresses of users signing in to its services, and Charter could match those IP addresses to those of its broadband customers. Charter has plenty of leeway to share its customers' private browsing data because the Republican-controlled Congress eliminated broadband privacy rules in 2017.

Customers could use VPN services to attempt to avoid detection, though.

Charter has 15.8 million residential TV customers nationwide, making it the second-biggest cable TV service after Comcast. But it lost 400,000 video customers in the past year. Charter's broadband service has gone in the other direction, rising from 23.1 million to 24.2 million residential customers in the past year.

Netflix and HBO take less strict approach

In contrast to Charter and Disney, Netflix and HBO haven't cared as much about account sharing.

Sharing a Netflix account "with individuals beyond your household" does violate Netflix's terms of use, but the restriction isn't heavily enforced. "Password sharing is something you have to learn to live with, because there's so much legitimate password sharing, like you sharing with your spouse, with your kids," Netflix CEO Reed Hastings said in 2016.

Now-former HBO CEO Richard Plepler once said that password

sharing is a “terrific marketing vehicle for the next generation of viewers” and that “we’re in the business of creating addicts.” (Plepler left HBO in February, less than a year after AT&T bought HBO owner Time Warner.)

Netflix, HBO, and the Disney-owned Hulu all limit the number of concurrent streams on each account, however. That doesn’t prevent account sharing entirely, but such a policy can make it inconvenient to share an account with a bunch of friends.

Disclosure: The Advance/Newhouse Partnership, which owns 13% of Charter, is part of Advance Publications. Advance Publications owns Condé Nast, which owns Ars Technica.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1552355