Streaming services need to stop showing me the same ad over and over (and over)

For the last few months, *Parks & Recreation* has been my go-to background show. It's what I watch while I'm doing the laundry, trying to catch up on email, or playing a video game I'd rather not listen to. The show's seven seasons are all on Peacock, which is handy, because so is *The Office* – my other background show. All of this is to say, I watch a lot of Peacock.

At one point today, while half-watching another *Parks & Rec* episode, an ad came on that I suddenly realized I knew. And I didn't just know it, I knew *every single word* of it. The jingle, especially, which ends in a sing-songy "CroppMetcalfe is the one with five stars!" That jingle has been stuck in my head for weeks, and it may never go away.

I don't blame CroppMetcalfe, which I'm sure is just as good at air conditioning and plumbing as it is at jingle composition. I blame streaming services. No matter what service you watch, I guarantee you've come across it: the same ad, over and over, repeated in every ad break until you promise yourself you'll never buy what they're selling no matter how good a deal. In my experience, Hulu and Peacock are the worst offenders. But I've even noticed it recently on TikTok: dozens, even hundreds of ads for the same product. For me it was True Classic T-shirts, before the last couple of days it pivoted hard to a board game called Doomlings that at first looked fun and now I refuse to play. It's a principle thing.

[embedded content]

This song is probably stuck in my head forever. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Advertising is coming for the streaming world in a big way. Many streamers, particularly those with linear-TV legacies, embraced advertising from the beginning. More recently, giants including Netflix and Disney have embraced the ad-supported business model, and both plan to roll out new tiers soon. In general, ad-supported streaming sounds like a great idea: most people can’t afford to pay for all the services that exist, and ads let users get to more services and more content without breaking the bank. Done right, everybody wins. Done poorly, it’s absolutely crazy-making.

Advertising is coming for the streaming world in a big way, and it could be a good thing

Already, ad-based streaming is mired in complicated questions about user data, viewer tracking, and decisions about who’s allowed to know what you’re watching and when. But I have a simpler request: can we make the ads bearable to watch? If I’m going to binge the full season of *The Resort* on Peacock, I’m looking at about four ad breaks a show, two ads apiece, over eight episodes. That’s 64 ads. If I see the same two ads 32 times each, there’s no way I’m getting to the end of the series.

There’s a perfectly rational reason for why this happens, by the way. It’s all about ad targeting. Let’s just take my own recent example, CroppMetcalfe. I’m a new homeowner, in the company’s area of service, with a 20-year-old HVAC unit that we know is going to need to be replaced soon. There’s a pretty good chance CroppMetcalfe knows that, too! I’m absolutely the company’s target market. But there aren’t that many people in my exact situation, and Peacock surely promised the company a certain number of ad impressions. If there were a million people who fit the bill, no problem. But if there are 500 of us, and a million impressions to serve, I’m going to get an awful lot of that five-star jingle.

Everybody involved has a reason to fix this, too. There's evidence to show that people who see the same ad over and over and over actually become *less* likely to buy the thing being advertised, and customers have been complaining about repetitive ads for years. In a Morning Consult survey from last year, 69 percent of respondents said the ads on streaming services were either "very repetitive" or "somewhat repetitive."

Unfortunately, it's also a surprisingly hard problem to solve. Even for a single show on a single platform, ads can come from a number of different sources: the network itself, the set-top box you're watching on, even potentially the manufacturer of your TV. The whole streaming-ad universe is a mess, by all accounts.

But it doesn't have to be like this! Some networks are embracing the idea of showing you one long ad at the beginning of the episode, and then nothing else while you're watching. Love that. I also enjoy the pause-screen ads, which is a perfect and unobtrusive way to tell me how to save money on my car insurance. The internet should make ads innovative and interesting again, but by and large it's still just drilling the same 30-second spot into my head.

The internet should make ads innovative and interesting again, and instead it's just drilling the same 30-second spot into my head

As the number of streaming services continues to grow, there are even more platforms competing for the same dollars, and there's no underlying technology to make sure you're not seeing the same ad on TikTok, Netflix, YouTube, and Disney Plus. Which means you absolutely *will* see the ad in all those places. The TV ad business is enormous, and that money is rapidly heading to platforms. Without some kind of change in the way that money moves around, the ads that come out of it are going to make all those platforms kind of unwatchable.

Disclosure: Comcast, which owns NBCUniversal, is also an investor in Vox Media, The Verge's parent company.

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