

Dish It Out

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I'll never forget when we got our first VCR. It was a top-loading Quasar, and it was about the size of the microwave oven I had in college. My dad tuned in the channels with a little plastic tool the size of a cocktail straw. I remember going to Shopko with him to buy a three-pack of Scotch blank tapes so we could record the infamous 'Star Wars Holiday Special.'

Thanks to our VCR, I could watch any show I wanted whenever I wanted. I watched the Star Wars Holiday Special until the tape nearly wore out. One of the greatest things about the VCR was that I could fast forward through the commercials to get to the animated portion of the special that introduced Boba Fett, the notorious bounty hunter featured in 'The Empire Strikes Back.'

Twenty-five years later, we got our first DVR, a Panasonic Replay. My kids and I used it to record the 'Star Wars: Clone Wars' cartoon. The DVR remote had a handy quick forward button that would advance the show in 30-second intervals, which is coincidentally the same duration of the average commercial.

Today, the Dish Network's Hopper DVR has an AutoHop feature, which allows viewers to skip television commercials entirely. This technological feat, however, has television networks hopping mad.

Fox, CBS and NBC Universal have each separately sued Dish Network over the AutoHop service. Fox's suit accuses Dish of copyright infringement and breach of contract. In a statement, Fox said, "We were given no choice but to file suit against one of our largest distributors, Dish Network, because of their surprising move to market a product with the clear goal of violating copyrights and destroying the fundamental underpinnings of the broadcast television ecosystem. Their wrongheaded decision requires us to take swift action in order to aggressively defend the future of free, over-the-air television."

NBC Universal's suit alleges Dish is guilty of copyright infringement and inducement of copyright infringement. NBC released a statement claiming it needed to file suit because "Advertising generates the revenue that makes it possible for local broadcast stations and national broadcast networks to pay for the creation of the news, sports and entertainment programming that are the hallmark of American broadcasting. Dish simply does not have the authority to tamper with the ads from broadcast replays on a wholesale basis for its own economic and commercial advantage."

Not to be outdone, CBS chimed in, saying, "This service takes existing network content and modifies it in a manner that is unauthorized and illegal. We believe this is a clear violation of copyright law and we intend to stop it."

Surprisingly, Dish filed its own lawsuit against all four major broadcast networks requesting that a judge declare that AdHop complies with copyright law. Dish released its own statement, countering that like me with our first Quasar, "Viewers have been skipping commercials since the advent of the remote control; we are giving them a feature they want and that gives them more control."

So if you do fast forward through the commercials, the networks are asking you to be kind and rewind.