

Are you really ready to cut the cable?

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Lots of TV shows and movies can now be found online, and the amount is increasing fast.

But if you're considering canceling your cable TV service in favor of [video](#) delivered over the Internet, you should think long and hard before you do.

Relying on the Internet for your video entertainment leaves a lot to be desired. The show or movie you want to watch may not be available when you want it. And it's often difficult to get a wide range of Internet-delivered video onto your TV.

If you're debating whether or not to cancel you cable service, you're probably not ready to live without it, said Josh Martin, a senior analyst at the Yankee Group, a technology industry research firm. "Unless you know where you'll be able to find everything and are sure that it's adequate to meet your needs, it's not going to be," he said.

But some consumers already have cut their cable cords. Caroline Bailey, an assistant professor of social work at California State University-Fullerton, canceled her cable service in 2004 because she thought it was overpriced.

Now she gets most of her news online or via National Public Radio. She tunes in TV shows in various ways. She watches them on her computer by going to a network Web site, rents an entire season of a show on DVD from her neighborhood Blockbuster, or times her workout to catch

a show at her gym while she's exercising.

"There's no reason for me to have cable," Bailey said. Not having it "really makes you be motivated to access the shows you want to watch."

While not many customers have yet abandoned cable, many have begun to consider it as a way to save money in a period of widespread economic insecurity.

Some 22 percent of broadband households say they may cut back on their cable-TV service in the next six months, according to the Diffusion Group, a market research firm. Meanwhile, some 25 percent of consumers surveyed by research firm In-Stat expressed interest in replacing their [pay-TV](#) service with Internet-delivered video.

The attraction of Internet video is obvious. A growing amount of it is free, either through network sites such as ABC.com or aggregator sites such as Hulu. It's generally on-demand, meaning you can watch it on your schedule rather than when networks choose to broadcast it. And you never have to worry about making a programming mistake or whether you have enough room to record the video, as is the case when you use a VCR or DVR.

The video available online is increasing. Last week, for instance, Disney announced a deal with Google's YouTube that will bring videos from Disney networks such as ABC and ESPN to the video-sharing site. Meanwhile, Disney reportedly is planning a partnership with Hulu that will add programming from its networks to that video site.

Still, a lot of video is not online. If you're a Netflix subscriber, you can use the company's streaming video service to access 12,000 videos on your PC or TV, but that is a fraction of the more than 100,000 DVDs the company has available.

While most movies aren't legally available online, a good portion of current TV shows are. But whether a show is available, when it's available and in what format it's available can vary from network to network and show to show.

You can buy the first two seasons of HBO's "Big Love," for example, on iTunes. But you won't find shows from the latest season there -- or on any other legal online site. Likewise, you can find "The Office" on Hulu the day after it airs, but you may have to wait eight days to watch "House."

And you can generally forget about finding live broadcasts online of professional sports games.

Eric Garland, CEO of BigChampagne, an online media measurement firm, recently decided to cancel his pay-TV service, largely to cut down on the amount of TV his family watched. Garland has several devices that allow him to get online video on his television, but he was amazed at how much access he lost after he cut off his cable service. Many shows on basic cable channels such as Discovery aren't yet available online.

"In my house, that was the biggest deal," Garland said.

Analysts such as Garland point to a number of reasons for the limited availability of Internet video.

Rights issues can be complicated, requiring agreement from studios, networks and other parties. And with the market still maturing and no one certain that they've discovered the ideal business model for online video, many video providers are still experimenting. Also, many are reluctant to undermine the cable providers because they still make more money from having their videos on cable than on the Internet.

The online video experience will most likely continue to improve, but many experts don't expect it to reach the quality of cable service anytime soon.

"The idea that this makes sense for the mass market consumer, we're clearly not there," said Greg Ireland, an analyst with IDC, a technology research firm.

BEFORE YOU CUT THE CABLE

Internet video experts advise consumers to first take a close look at what they watch and what's available online. Among the things to consider:

The TV connection: Devices that deliver video from the Internet to your big-screen television can be expensive and difficult to configure -- and usually offer only a fraction of what you can get on your computer, much less your cable box.

High definition, low availability: You can find thousands of movies and TV shows in some fashion online, but only a small percentage is in high definition. Lower resolution video may look OK on your laptop's screen but may not look great on your living room TV -- assuming you can get it there.

Limited selection: The selection of Hollywood-produced videos available online is a hodgepodge of current television shows, recent movies and library titles. Whether a title is available varies from network to network and show to show. In some cases, you'll find an entire run of a current television show. In other cases, you won't be able to find any episodes at all.

Timing issues: In some cases, you can find a television show online the day after it's broadcast, or a movie the same day the DVD is released. In other cases, you may have to wait weeks or months to find the title online. How long those titles are available can vary as well. Sites such as Hulu limit the number of episodes of a TV show that are available to only the most recent.

Cost: A growing number of shows and movies are available through ad-supported sites such as Hulu. But many videos are available only through services such as iTunes that require you to buy or rent them a la carte. Depending on how many videos you watch, your total bill for such services can approach that of what you pay Comcast.

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