

Review: Watching live TV on the go, for free

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This Dec. 30, 2010 photo shows the LG Portable DVD and Mobile DTV player, in New York. (AP Photo/Aaron Jackson)

(AP) -- Here in the U.S., consumers have grown used to gadgets that do just about everything: surf the Web, check e-mail, play games, download music and even relay driving directions.

But in one respect, they lag behind what's available in other countries, because they can't pick up free [digital broadcasts](#) the way TVs can.

A portable DVD player by [LG Electronics](#) Inc. is the first gadget available in the U.S. that does just that, though if TV broadcasters get their wish it will be followed by many phones, tablets, PCs and in-car entertainment systems.

My colleagues and I had a chance to play with LG's player in two cities

and found that while compelling, the technology has a way to go before it's likely to win over mainstream consumers.

LG's \$249 mobile player doesn't pick up the exact same signals that TVs do. Instead, they pick up a new "Mobile DTV" duplicate signal, which some broadcasters have added to their towers. Depending on where you are, you could get news, sports, weather and a prime-time lineup - not to mention the commercials that accompany them.

Mobile DTV is available in 27 U.S. cities and counting, including major hubs such as New York, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and Atlanta. It's also in smaller cities such as Springfield, Mass. According to the Online Mobile Video Coalition, the group of broadcasters trying to help Mobile DTV catch on, the service is on track to expand to 60 cities this year.

The breadth of programming varies from city to city. The coalition says people should be able to find seven stations in Washington, for example, but just one in Denver. It expects more stations to be added nationwide in 2011.

For now, few gadgets can accept Mobile DTV signals. Although some phones sold in Japan, China, South Korea and Germany can play [live TV](#) for free, not a single one sold in the U.S. does.

That may be because, so far, few consumers seem interested in watching live TV on their phones. [Qualcomm](#) Inc. is shuttering its FLO TV service in 2011 after less than four years because not enough people signed up.

FLO TV's example must be disheartening to TV broadcasters hoping to stay relevant in the age of the smart phone. But Mobile DTV has two advantages over the FLO TV model that could prove crucial: It's free

and it carries valuable local news and weather shows. FLO TV cost upward of \$9 per month and had only national channels.

The Mobile DTV device I tested looks like an anachronism at a time gadgets are getting smaller and sleeker. Although it weighs less than a netbook at 2 pounds, LG's Mobile DTV/DVD player has a stubby shape - 2 inches thick when closed - making it a less travel-friendly companion.

The player folds open like a laptop, but instead of a keyboard on the bottom half, there's a pop-open DVD player with menu and playback controls next to it. The screen is smaller than a laptop's, measuring 7 inches diagonally.

In testing around New York City, a colleague and I found just two stations, one carrying ION Television and one Spanish-language Telemundo affiliate. A colleague in Washington, meanwhile, found just one station, an NBC affiliate.

The picture was watchable but of a much lower resolution than you'd get on an actual TV. The frame rate is also lower, resulting in slight stutters when people move on-screen. I didn't notice any hiccups in the audio while watching a nature documentary on DVD, but the sound frequently fell out of sync with the video when I watched live TV.

My coworker in Washington had better luck: She reported smooth video with few audio drop-outs.

Watching a movie on such a small screen grew tiresome, in the same way that I'd rather watch a long movie on a tablet than on my smart phone. With a larger screen, LG could also make the resolution sharper, which would make DVDs look better.

Although the player is loaded with easily identifiable buttons for pausing or fast-forwarding a DVD, for example, it's not immediately clear how to change TV stations. You have to press a button on the side of the player to make a list of channels appear and then use arrow buttons, located on a different part of the device, to select the one you want. This process should seem archaic to people used to remotes, much less tap-able touch-screen phones.

If you're traveling, you might find yourself moving in and out of TV coverage zones. Scanning the spectrum to update the list of available stations can be time-consuming - for me, just refreshing the list of channels available in my New York office took two and a half minutes. This might take less time if Mobile DTV technology were built into a smart phone, which could use the navigation system to automatically figure out where it is and then download the list of local channels.

The player promises up to four and a half hours of battery life. I found that even after watching TV three times for a few minutes at a time, the battery life dipped to four out of five bars. After a few minutes of watching a movie on DVD, it sank to three out of five bars. With the TV playing continuously, the player lasted less than two hours before it turned off.

After playing with the gadget for a few days, one question for me is, do consumers really want a device like this? I, for one, would worry that Mobile DTV won't be around for long.

That's because Mobile DTV wouldn't be possible without the cooperation of local broadcast stations. But not many people watch broadcast TV compared to cable or satellite, and the Federal Communications Commission has started to look at ways to encourage or pay broadcasters to end transmissions and turn over the spectrum for mobile broadband use. That's what lets people watch, say, YouTube on

their iPhones, and is so far a more popular way to consume video on the go than a service like FLO TV.

As for LG's player, which carries the catchy name "DP570MH," even the notion of a portable DVD player seems dated when you consider that Apple Inc.'s 1.5-pound iPad can store up to 80 hours of video, or dozens of movies, which can be rented or purchased outright online.

But the iPad is pricey - \$499 to \$829, depending on the configuration - and the LG player's simplicity and lower price might make it a better choice for parents needing to distract restless children riding in the backseat.

At a consumer electronics trade show in Las Vegas this week, manufacturers have been showing off dozens of devices that can receive Mobile DTV broadcasts, including plug-in antennas for the iPad.

It doesn't seem like a crazy idea that these could catch on, and they may even provide an easier user experience than the LG player. But there's one big hurdle in the way of the broadcasters' hopes of making Mobile DTV a mainstream technology: Wireless companies have shown zero interest in selling phones with Mobile DTV chips because they prefer to sell more profitable data plans instead.

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