

Annoyed consumers have alternatives to Netflix

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If you're ticked off at Netflix because of its recent price increases and service changes, the good news is you've got plenty of options for streaming video. The bad news is that none offers exactly what you get from Netflix.

Netflix's streaming [video service](#) has won plenty of fans and subscribers in recent years. For a modest monthly price, [consumers](#) can choose from tens of thousands of videos they can watch instantly on their TVs, PCs, smartphones and tablets. Among recent additions are past episodes of the hit show "Mad Men."

But in July, [Netflix](#) announced a steep price increase. Then last week, the company revealed that, because it plans to separate its streaming video and DVD-by-mail businesses, customers of both will soon have to maintain separate accounts on distinct websites that will no longer be integrated.

Netflix also recently lost the right to stream certain [movies](#) from Sony and Disney. And early next year, it could lose the right to stream many more videos from those companies because Starz, which has the online rights, recently said it would not renew its contract with Netflix, which expires in February.

Those developments have left many Netflix consumers feeling like they are paying more and getting less. Fortunately, they have alternatives.

Perhaps the service closest to Netflix is offered by Amazon.com as part of its Amazon Prime service. Amazon Prime began as a free-shipping feature. For \$79 a year, Amazon Prime customers get free two-day or reduced-price next-day shipping on their orders. Earlier this year, Amazon added [streaming video](#) to the package.

Like Netflix, Amazon Prime allows customers to choose from thousands of videos that they can watch instantly. Customers can watch movies whenever they want, as many times as they want and can pause and then resume them days later at no additional charge.

Amazon Prime shares another similarity with Netflix: It's nowhere near comprehensive. It offers just 9,000 videos total, including just 2,000 movies. While you will occasionally find a recent series such as "Downton Abbey," much of the fare is dated movies and older [TV](#) series.

While the selection on Amazon Prime is less than what customers will find on Netflix, it has increased markedly since Amazon launched the service. And Amazon's price is about \$16 less than what consumers would pay for a whole year of Netflix streaming.

On the other hand, it's not nearly as easy to watch Amazon's streaming movies. You can access the service via your computer, Roku's digital set-top boxes and some Internet-connected TVs and Blu-ray players. But, unlike Netflix, you can't get Amazon Prime through Microsoft's Xbox 360 or any other game console. Nor can you get it on an iPad, iPhone or any other handheld device.

The other major subscription-based streaming service is offered by Hulu. At \$8 a month, the company's Hulu Plus service costs the same as Netflix. It similarly offers tens of thousands of videos to choose from and, like Netflix, can be accessed from a wide range of devices.

Hulu has some advantages over Netflix. On their PCs, consumers can watch a limited selection of movies and television episodes for free without having to sign up for Hulu Plus.

And Hulu offers many more television programs than Netflix. Customers can access about 33,000 episodes of current and past television shows. If you want to watch past episodes of major network TV shows, Hulu is the place to go.

But it's not a great source for movies. Hulu offers only about 1,600 films, few of them recent box-office hits. And Hulu has a few big holes in its TV selection: No shows from CBS, AMC or premium channels such as HBO.

Netflix customers have other options. Pay-TV services allow subscribers to watch thousands of movies and television shows on-demand on their TVs via their cable or satellite boxes often at no additional charge. Comcast recently launched applications for Apple and Android handheld devices that allow its subscribers to watch streaming free videos on those devices. Meanwhile, Dish announced a service last week that resembles Netflix's old offerings: For \$10 a month on top of their monthly Dish bill, subscribers will have access to 3,000 streaming movies on their PCs and Dish set-top boxes as well as DVDs by mail from Blockbuster.

The big drawback of those services, of course, is that you have to have a pricey pay-TV subscription, the very thing that many Netflix streaming customers are trying to avoid.

There are also truly free services. Crackle is probably the most notable of these and is appealing because you can watch its videos on PCs, Apple and Android smartphones and tablets, Roku's digital player and Sony's Internet-connected televisions and its PlayStation 3 game console. It offers a selection of hundreds of movies and [television shows](#),

including "Seinfeld." But most of the videos are older ones and they only come from Sony, not from other Hollywood studios.

If you're willing to look at a la carte services, you have plenty of other choices, including Apple's iTunes, Amazon's On Demand service and Vudu, now owned by Wal-Mart. The advantage of these is that they typically offer a much wider selection of movies - and sometimes TV shows - than you'd find on any of the streaming services. But you have to pay for each video you watch, either by buying or renting it. If you rent the video, you typically have just 30 days before it will expire and usually just a day or two to complete watching it once you begin.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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