

Options explode for consumers seeking TV content via Web

February 8 2013, by Rodney Ho

Not too long ago, TV viewers had three programming options: satellite, cable or the good ol' antenna if you just wanted to watch free broadcast channels and DVDs.

But the world has been changing, thanks to the massive expansion of streaming content from the Web that you can see on a TV, desktop, laptop, tablet and smartphone.

Cable and satellite penetration peaked in the summer of 2010 at 90.5 percent of households, and has slipped slightly, to 90.1 percent, according to Nielsen research. The typical subscriber now shells out \$86 a month, more than double the average a decade ago, according to a recent study by the NPD Group.

While a hardy few have "cut the cord," more viewers are supplementing their cable or satellite subscriptions with content from Web-based providers such as Netflix, Amazon Instant Video or Hulu.

Here's a guide to how you can use Wi-Fi to access streaming video for your TV, plus a look at content options.

[SMART TVS](#): Typically having 40- to 65-inch screens, these bring you regular cable and satellite programming but also content on the Web, where more original series are popping up, such as "House of Cards," the new Netflix drama starring Kevin Spacey. These TVs generally cost \$200 more than a comparably sized regular set.

Most provide built-in applications for such sites as Netflix and Hulu Plus, as well as a Web browser. These options mostly require either a subscription costing about \$8 a month or charge per film or TV show.

SET-TOP RECEIVERS: If you own a regular TV or prefer to buy a new one that's not Internet-ready, you can take a cheaper route and buy a separate set-top box. Three of the more popular ones:

-Roku: Provides the best price, with access to hundreds of streaming audio and video sites, and an excellent searching function. Price: \$50-\$100.

-[Apple TV](#): The current version integrates well with iTunes and Apple devices. Price: \$99.

-Boxee: Geared to tech-savvy users who like to share TV and movie recommendations via Twitter or Facebook. It also comes with a full Web browser, which Roku and Apple do not, but not Hulu Plus. Price: \$99.

GAME SYSTEMS: Many people already own video game systems that have Internet access:

-Nintendo Wii U: Known to be more family-oriented in its games and activities than Xbox or Playstation. The older Wii provides access to Netflix and Hulu Plus, but does not offer high-definition streams. The new Wii U came out in November and has a new feature called TVii, which not only streams content, but also can serve as a universal remote. Price: \$300-\$350.

-Microsoft Xbox 360: Originally designed just to play video games. The Live Gold option provides access to such services as Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, ESPN and Hulu Plus. It costs at least \$5 extra a month, plus more to see films or TV shows. Price: \$200-\$300.

-Sony Playstation 3: Similar to Xbox, but access to Netflix and similar services is free. Like Xbox, you pay more to see films or shows, but SP3 also comes with more memory to store films, TV programs and other media. Price: \$270-\$300.

BLU-RAY DVD PLAYERS: These players, with built-in Wi-Fi, are increasingly common. [Prices](#) start around \$70. Consumer Reports' top-rated players are the LG BP320, which includes Hulu Plus, Netflix, Vudu and Pandora Internet radio, and the Panasonic DMP-BD87, with similar access.

CONTENT OPTIONS: Some providers charge one price for all their offerings, while others bill you on an a la carte basis. With all-you-can-view services, you don't usually get the newest TV shows and films. With the pay-per-view providers, costs can escalate if you're not careful.

The most popular options:

-All-you-can-view Netflix: The most popular provider, it specializes in full past seasons of TV shows. And it's starting to create its own shows such as a revival of "Arrested Development." Price: \$8 a month.

-Hulu Plus: Focuses on individual episodes of recent shows ("The Office," "Modern Family") but, unlike [Netflix](#), there are commercials. You can see shows on smartphones, tablets and TVs. Price: \$8 a month.

Pay-per-view:

-Amazon Instant Video: Plenty of on-demand, commercial-free and current-season episodes of TV shows not available on Hulu, such as "The Walking Dead" and "Mad Men," for sale at \$1.99 per episode. You also can rent films for \$4 to \$5 each, or buy them for about \$15.

-Vudu: A service of Wal-Mart, Vudu provides high-quality HD streams with a similar price structure to Amazon Instant.

-[iTunes](#): Sells individual TV episodes or "season passes," which automatically download new episodes as they become available. New movies usually for sale the same time as DVD releases. Integrates well with Apple products such as the iPad, but can't be accessed on non-Apple devices.

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