

Review: Sling TV a promising new take on pay TV, but needs work

February 4 2015, by Troy Wolverton, San Jose Mercury News

I really like the idea of Sling TV - and a lot of other folks might appreciate a twenty-buck pay TV bill as well - but right now, Dish's new low-cost TV service requires too many compromises for me and probably for you, too.

You get just a dozen of the top cable channels and you can't record programs to watch them later. But for consumers longing for new options, Sling TV is a promising development and may foreshadow a coming revolution in pay TV.

Dish announced Sling TV with much fanfare at the recent Consumer Electronics Show. It represents one of the first ways for consumers to get access to a collection of cable channels without having to sign up for regular [service](#).

But it's also part of a growing trend away from traditional pay TV and toward Internet streaming. Sony has a similar offering in the works. Nickelodeon announced it will offer its programs directly to consumers, bypassing its traditional pay-TV partners. Last year, HBO, Showtime and CBS all announced similar plans.

At first blush, Sling TV's new service sounds great. For only \$20 a month, you get access to ESPN, CNN, TBS and other top cable channels. Better yet, you don't need to sign a long-term contract; instead you subscribe on a monthly basis. And the low price is not an introductory offer but Dish's regular rate.

You also don't have to worry about renting, installing or otherwise dealing with set-top boxes or other pay-TV equipment. And the service, which streams channels across the Internet, works pretty well. I tested it on my iPhone, my iPad and on my TV. The video was generally high quality and the system was easy to use.

Sling TV offers a new way to navigate channels and programs. Instead of the traditional grid-style guide, it arrays channels and programs in rows. To find a particular one, you swipe or press the arrow button. Programs that have recently aired that you can watch on demand are on the left while upcoming programs are on the right.

I did run into one bug. Several times when I was scrolling through Sling TV stations or programs, the Roku device I was using became unresponsive; I'd press a button and nothing would happen. Eventually the service would become unstuck, but it was frustrating to have to wait for that.

Sling TV, which is expected to launch this month, also offers access to a wide variety of movies to rent. And if you want a few more channels to choose from, you can sign up for Sling's "extra" packages for \$5 each. At launch, the company will be offering extra packages of kids and news channels, each of which comes with four to five channels, and it plans to offer a sports package also.

Dish is not targeting the service at traditional pay-TV customers like me but at those who have opted out of pay TV, either because they've already "cut the cord" and canceled or because they've never signed up for pay-TV service at all. That's a significant and growing market; Dish estimates that 1 in 5 households fall into one of those two categories. Sling TV could prove attractive to some in those groups because it offers access to some popular channels at a bargain price.

But to appeal more widely - even within that group - it has some shortcomings it needs to work out.

The biggest problem with Sling TV is [channel](#) selection. The 12 channels you can get through the service just aren't a whole lot. If you're like me, you don't need 500 channels but you would like to have more choices than those 12 - and there's a good chance that those channels aren't available from Sling TV. Among the most notable options missing: USA, FX, SyFy, Bravo, AMC and Fox News. At least for now, none of those channels are offered in any of the extra packages, either.

Another problem with Sling TV, at least for me, is that it doesn't offer a way to record programs. While you can see programs that will be playing in the coming hours or the next day, there's no way to [program](#) the service to save them for you to watch later.

Instead, Sling directs users to its on-demand service. Unfortunately, many of the networks it offers don't provide on-demand access to their previously aired programs. You can't watch anything from ESPN on demand, for example, or anything from TBS. And even those networks that do offer on-demand programs only allow you to view programs that have aired in the previous three days.

There's one other big shortcoming of Sling TV: Users can watch only one stream at a time. So, unless you have separate Sling TV accounts, you can't watch one show through the service while your spouse watches a different one.

Sling TV offers a glimpse of what an Internet-delivered television service could look like. But it's probably not yet enough to tempt either those who have already cut the cord or those who are considering it.

Rating: Seven out of 10

What: Sling TV Internet-delivered television service

Likes: Inexpensive; doesn't require a long-term contract; accessible through a wide variety of devices; provides access to top [cable channels](#); offers a wide variety of movies for rent; easy to use

Dislikes: Offers a small number of channels and is missing many popular ones; doesn't offer a way to record programs; several of the channels don't offer on-demand programs; offers access to only one stream at a time

Price: \$20 monthly

Web: sling.com

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