

Review: Sony streaming service modernizes TV, not your bill

March 25 2015, by Anick Jesdanun



This file screen shot image provided by Sony Computer Entertainment America shows the My Shows portion of the Sony PlayStation Vue interface. Launched Wednesday, March 18, 2015 in New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, Sony's PlayStation Vue service is the latest Internet-only offering, with more than 50 broadcast and cable channels starting at \$50 a month. HBO and ESPN aren't included, but additional sports channels are available for a \$10 or \$20 more. (AP Photo/Sony Computer Entertainment America, File)

Sony's new PlayStation Vue television service probably won't save you money over cable.

Starting at \$50 a month, Vue offers more than 50 over-the-air and cable channels for online streaming. But you need a PlayStation game console and you still need Internet access—likely from the same cable company you're trying to ditch. If you press, your pay-TV company might offer a slimmed-down TV package that's comparable to Sony's in price and lineup.

Instead of a lower bill, what you get is an attempt to modernize how we watch TV:

CHANNEL LINEUP

The service currently is limited to New York, Chicago and Philadelphia. More cities are coming later this year.

Vue has many popular cable channels, local CBS, NBC and Fox stations, and major networks that televise sports, including March Madness basketball. Local sports channels are available for an extra \$10. But major omissions include ABC, PBS and ESPN. News is available through CNN, MSNBC and Fox News Channel; no C-SPAN. Kids get Nickelodeon channels and The Cartoon Network, but not Disney. AMC is coming, though not necessarily in time of the April 5 return of "Mad Men."

Vue falls short in truly modernizing TV by failing to offer much choice. I would have preferred the option of buying a low tier of fewer channels—the ones I actually watch—for less than \$50.

IT'S LIKE CABLE ... OR NOT

Video quality was on par with cable. It takes a second or two to switch shows as Vue loads video data, but cable TV has that lag, too.

Unfortunately, the maximum resolution I got was 720p. Dish's competing Sling TV online service offers sharper video at 1080p.

You get standard DVR controls for live TV, including pause and rewind—but you get a brief delay here, too. There's a similar delay with recorded shows, making it difficult to skip commercials. I have found cable systems and stand-alone DVRs such as TiVo much smoother.

FINDING SHOWS

Vue gets rid of channel numbers and simply presents all cable channels in alphabetical order. Who can remember that Nick Jr is on Channel 257 anyway? Easier to scroll to "N." You can mark channels as favorites so they appear first. Over-the-air channels are listed next, then [cable channels](#). Unlike other program grids, channels run horizontally and show times are vertical. Click on a show to start watching or record.

To search, enter the first letter or two, and your choices narrow instantly. "SC" gets me "Scandal" as an option, for instance. Unfortunately, the search doesn't include episode titles, actors or keywords, all of which TiVo offers. Vue also doesn't integrate shows on Netflix, Hulu and other services, which TiVo does.

Vue recommends shows based on your personal viewing habits and what others are watching, something cable doesn't do. An explore feature lets you see everything available based on such criteria as genre, program length and age rating. It's useful, except for the fact that Vue treats past, current and future shows the same. You might click on a show only to find out it won't be available for three days.

RECORDINGS

Recording an episode gets you all future episodes of that show automatically, along with any available on-demand from the past few days. Episodes are organized neatly in the order they first aired, not when they got recorded. But the practice of mixing in future shows gets annoying. You also can't record just a single episode, nor can you extend recordings for events that might run over, such as sports. You can't stop future recordings of a show without deleting past episodes either.

There's unlimited storage, but shows get removed after 28 days, with no option to archive. And many sports—including March Madness games—mysteriously disappeared after the game's conclusion, possibly because of rights issues. Regular DVRs don't do this. (DVR controls work while the game is still on, though.)

REMOTE VIEWING

You get up to three simultaneous streams within your home network. An iPad app is coming, but there will be limits on what you can watch, especially outside your home. Vue does offer mobile apps for several channels, so you can watch past and current shows remotely that way. I could come here for March Madness replays, but I shouldn't have to.

COMPARISONS

Vue is more expensive than Dish's \$20-a-month Sling TV, but also

offers much more. Sling TV limits you to one stream at a time, and there are no broadcast channels. You do get ESPN and nationwide access on a variety of devices, though.

Vue's modernized interface is impressive. But for those used to cable and satellite TV, TiVo already does this and does it better. Vue shows a lot of potential, but needs improvements to be a viable threat.

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