

Review: You can channel-surf online, but you may miss cable

May 11 2016, by By Anick Jesdanun



In this Jan. 5, 2015, file photo, Joe Clayton, president and CEO of Dish Network, introduces the Sling TV, a live television streaming service, at a news conference at the International CES in Las Vegas. Online services such as Sling TV and PlayStation Vue are emerging as alternatives to cable TV, while Hulu plans to start its own. Though it might feel satisfying to ditch your cable TV company, there are things you'll miss. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

It might feel cathartic to ditch your cable TV company. But if you're

looking to channel-surf online, you're going to find services such as Sling TV or PlayStation Vue coming up short in some respects.

Both services offer live TV channels just like cable, but you can't connect your own [digital video recorder](#). Dish's Sling TV service limits you to whatever episodes a given network offers on demand. And while Sony's Vue has an Internet-based DVR with "unlimited" storage, it deletes stored shows automatically after 28 days.

Worse, arcane legal rights restrict what you can watch. Your channel lineup might differ depending on where you live because the services have rights to only a handful of broadcast stations around the country. And even from your couch, what you can watch changes depending on which device you use or whether you connect using home Wi-Fi or cellular.

Online alternatives to cable are taking root. Last week, Hulu announced that it's working on its own online service; Apple and YouTube have also expressed interest, according to news reports. They'll have to negotiate rights, too, though Hulu might have an advantage, as it's owned by the parent companies of three major broadcasters—ABC, Fox and NBC.

To be sure, there's a lot to like about these services so far:

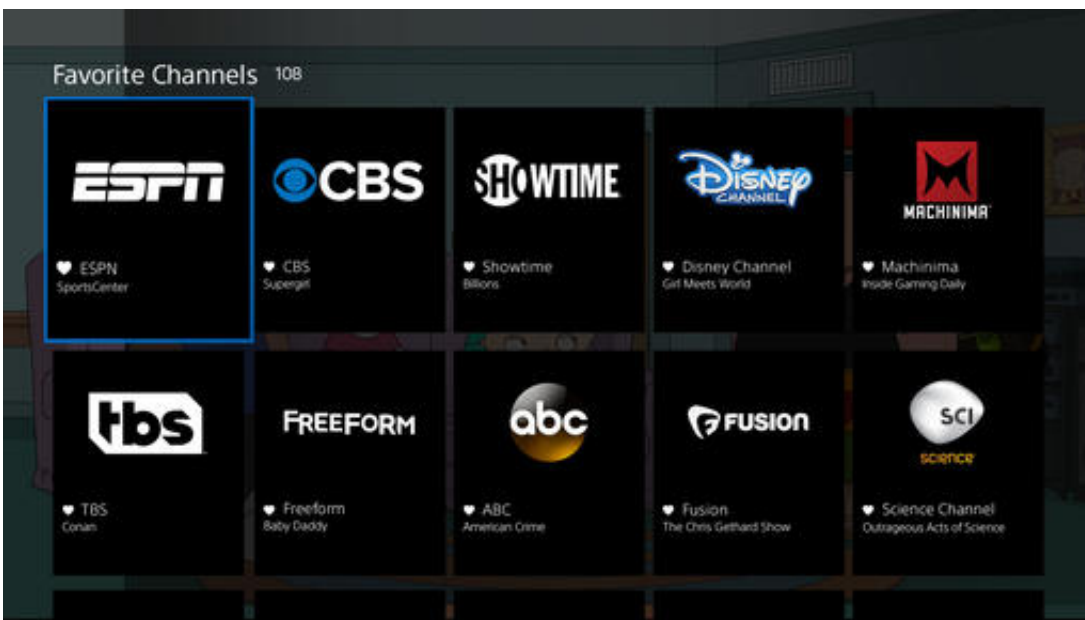
— Price. Online alternatives tend to be cheaper than cable, though with far fewer channels. Sling TV, for instance, offers a base package of 26 channels for \$20 a month. Plus, there's no set-top box or other equipment to rent.

— Easier navigation. Live TV, recorded shows and channels' on-demand offerings show up in a central location with a single search. There's also no need to memorize channel numbers; just click on the network's name.

— More screens. Cable TV is designed for the TV. Sling TV and Vue also work on phones and tablets, though with limitations having to do with—you guessed it—television rights.

Sling TV and Vue are pioneers in delivering TV to homes over the Internet, and immediate perfection was never in the cards. It wasn't for cable TV on Day One, and many people will argue that it still isn't.

Yet online TV could be much more, even in its early days—were it not for these pesky rights. Some of these restrictions come from the channels; others come from the producers of the shows or sporting events themselves.



This file image provided by Sony shows a frame grab demonstrating Sony's PlayStation Vue streaming-television service. Online services such as Sling TV and PlayStation Vue are emerging as alternatives to cable TV, while Hulu plans to start its own. Though it might feel satisfying to ditch your cable TV company, there are things you'll miss. (Courtesy of Sony via AP, File)

With both Sling TV and Vue, some sports channels are blocked when you travel to another city. Pro football games aren't available on phones, even at home, as Verizon has exclusive NFL rights on phones.

On Vue, you can stream USA Network-aired reruns of "Modern Family" on an iPhone over home Wi-Fi, but not cellular, even at home; meanwhile, reruns of the same show on channels 5, 7 and 9 in New York stream just fine on your phone's own data network or on a friend's Wi-Fi. Some other shows won't stream on a phone or tablet at all, even through a home Wi-Fi network.

True, cable TV has similar restrictions on mobile devices, but at least their services were originally designed for the TV. Online services stress that they aren't bound to TV screens.

Plus, with traditional TV, you can get around these restrictions with a \$150 Slingbox (unrelated to Sling TV). The device hooks to your DVR and replicates on a mobile app whatever's on the living-room screen. Or you can get a TiVo, which lets you view live and recorded shows remotely through TiVo's app. None of these options work with online services.

The good news: The number of blocked shows is declining steadily, as channels add streaming rights for shows whose contracts have come up for renewal.

But there are occasional hiccups, particularly with sports. A recording of the Super Bowl disappeared from Vue after the game ended, so there was no way to catch up on the halftime show. Rather than risk missing the Olympics on NBC, I ordered a TiVo DVR last week and plan to hook up an antenna. (If you're on Vue, chances are you can't watch the Olympics via NBC anyway; Vue currently holds rights to NBC stations in only seven of the 210 U.S. markets.)

These services also need more flexible DVRs. Sling offers more than 10,000 hours of shows and movies on demand, but that doesn't matter if your show isn't one of them. As for Vue, Sony says most people watch shows within two weeks, so its 28-day expiration still gives people plenty of time. It's nice not to deal with storage filling up, but you can't binge on entire seasons at once or archive that one show you like to watch over and over.

There once was a better alternative called Aereo, which offered over-the-air channels and an Internet DVR with a set amount of storage for a monthly fee. If you wanted to store an entire season of "The Simpsons," you simply had less room for "The Bachelorette." Your call.

Aereo was pleasant to use because it didn't try to navigate a sea of rights. It reasoned that it could simply pick up over-the-air signals just like everyone else and record shows on a DVR just like everyone else.

But broadcasters and the U.S. Supreme Court disagreed. Aereo was forced to shut down. What's left are less-flexible services that have to cater to the idiosyncrasies of the TV industry.

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