

Review: Cutting the cord gets easier with Sling TV, DirecTV Now, other alternatives to cable

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As tired as I am of paying my pay TV bill, I haven't yet been convinced to cut the cord.

Until recently, the online alternatives to traditional cable and satellite TV packages didn't measure up. They didn't offer access to the same broad assortment of programming. And even as many cable channels started offering their programs through apps, they often required users to have a cable or satellite subscription to watch them.

But that situation is changing. You can already choose from at least three different services that offer a cablelike assortment of channels that are streamed over the internet.

While those offerings aren't perfect, they are improving, and more such services are on the way. Indeed, with the online alternatives becoming more attractive, it may not be too long before I ditch my traditional [set-top box](#).

Perhaps the company making the biggest splash with a streaming multichannel video service is Dish, which launched its Sling TV offering last year. When I first tested it, I liked Sling's potential.

With Sling, Dish was trying to make pay TV more like Netflix - inexpensive and easy. At \$20 a month, it was a relative bargain

compared with the typical cable TV package. Because users tuned in with a [digital media player](#) like Roku's boxes, they didn't have to pay costly monthly fees to rent a set-top box.

Rather than overwhelming customers with hundreds of channels they'd never watch, Dish promised a more tailored offering of top networks. And like Netflix, it allowed customers to drop out painlessly; instead of having to sign up for a long-term contract, they paid month to month and could cancel at any time.

But Sling's offering was hobbled by offering users too little. At launch, it came with only a dozen channels in the basic package. And users could watch only one stream at a time; a husband and wife couldn't watch two different programs through Sling simultaneously unless they each had their own account.

Over the past 18 months, Dish has been quietly improving Sling. The basic package - which is still \$20 a month - now includes 28 channels, including most of the top networks. For \$25 a month, you can stream up to three devices at once and get 44 channels, although you do lose access to ESPN and the Disney Channel. You can also now get up to 100 channels through the service by tacking on collections of channels that Sling bundles together in \$5 bunches.

In short, Sling is looking more and more like a real rival to a traditional pay TV service - albeit one that's delivered on terms that are much friendlier to consumers.

What's promising about this emerging era of internet-delivered pay TV is Sling TV isn't your only choice. Instead, you're likely to be able to choose from numerous alternatives that offer you similarly friendly terms - lower prices, no costly equipment to rent, the ability to tune in programming on smartphones and tablets as well as televisions, and no

long-term contracts.

Already, you can also choose from Sony's PlayStation Vue service, which, like Sling TV, has been getting better since the company launched it last year. Sony recently added the NFL Network to the service and this summer made it available on Roku digital players and Android smartphones and tablets.

Some Comcast subscribers have another choice - that company's \$15 a month Stream TV. That service, targeted at the company's broadband customers, allows them to watch live, on-demand and recorded programs on smartphones and tablets. Right now, though, it's offered in only a handful of states, not including California, and users can watch only some of their programs on their televisions or away from home.

You can expect to have more options soon. AT&T plans to launch DirecTV Now, a multichannel pay TV service delivered over the internet rather than via a satellite dish, later this year. Hulu has said that it plans to launch a cable TV-like streaming video service next year. Meanwhile, Comcast is reportedly considering opening up Stream TV to a much wider audience of potential customers - including those who aren't subscribers to its broadband service.

And more companies may join the fray. After years of nonstop growth, the number of households signed up for some form of pay TV fell in 2013 for the first time ever. The industry has now experienced three straight years of declines and the results from the first half of 2016 look like it will be another down year. Thanks to those declines and the growth in the overall population, more than a fifth of all American households have now either canceled their pay TV service or never signed up for one.

That dynamic is making the TV industry as a whole nervous - and much

more receptive to online alternatives.

When Dish was putting Sling TV together two years ago, many of the cable programmers didn't want to admit that cord cutting was a real phenomenon, Sling CEO Roger Lynch told me recently. And many were wary about how online alternatives like Sling might affect the pay TV industry.

But those attitudes have shifted as Sling has added subscribers while the rest of the industry, including parent company Dish, has shed them.

"They realize this is the future," he said.

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