

# Review: Price right, service not with DirecTV Now

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If you're looking for a low-cost alternative to pricey pay TV service, you've a got new option from AT&T.

Late last month, AT&T became the latest player to offer a pay TV bundle that's streamed over the internet rather than delivered through a cable [service](#) or satellite transmission. Its DirecTV Now service joins Dish's Sling TV, Sony's PlayStation Vue and Comcast's Stream TV.

I wanted to like DirecTV Now, and it certainly has some attractive features, including its price. But I found the overall service disappointing and, at least for me, an inadequate substitute for a traditional pay TV package.

As with its rivals, DirecTV Now is largely directed at consumers who have either ditched their pay TV service or never signed up for one. As such, it offers terms that are designed to be more consumer friendly than those you usually get from the cable or satellite companies.

With DirecTV Now, like Sling TV and PlayStation Vue - but unlike traditional bundles - you don't have to sign a long-term contract; instead, you can sign up one month and cancel the next. Rather than having to rent pricey set-top boxes, you can tune in the services via your smartphone or with one of several different digital streaming devices, including Google's \$35 Chromecast. And you don't need an installer to come out to your house to set up the service; instead, all you do is download an app and sign in to your account to start watching programs.

As with any video service delivered over the internet, the quality of the picture will depend on factors like the amount of traffic on the network and interference from nearby Wi-Fi networks. But with my relatively fast broadband connection, programs delivered through DirecTV Now came in sharp and clear, and I could change channels fairly quickly.

For many consumers, one of the biggest attractions of DirecTV Now is that it generally offers lower prices than you'll find for a traditional pay TV package, even an entry-level one. DirecTV Now's base package, dubbed "Live a Little," costs \$35 a month. Unlike some traditional services, that price includes the ability to get all its channels in high-definition. And that's a standalone price; you don't have to sign up for a bundle that includes AT&T's voice or broadband service. Indeed, you can subscribe to Comcast or some other broadband provider and still get DirecTV Now.

The lower prices do come with trade-offs. Most notably, you get access to fewer channels with the internet-delivered pay TV services than you would with a traditional cable bundle. The "Live a Little" package comes with about 60 channels, compared with more than 100 that you might get with a traditional pay TV service.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Traditional pay TV packages have ballooned in recent years with channels that few people either want or watch. By contrast, DirecTV Now and its rivals are generally offering what might be thought of as "the essentials." Of the top 25 cable channels that are most watched in prime time, DirecTV Now offers 23, all of which come included in its basic "Live a Little" package.

Still, DirecTV Now is missing some notable cable channels, including the NFL Network and Adult Swim. And it only offers local broadcast channels in about 25 metro areas. In some of those markets, it only offers one or two of the channels - only the Fox station, say, or the just

the ABC one. Meanwhile, it doesn't offer CBS or CW channels to any customers.

DirecTV Now has more serious shortcomings than its [channel](#) lineup. The biggest for me was that unlike its rivals online and off, it doesn't offer a way to record programs. AT&T spokesman Leland Kim said the company plans to add a DVR feature sometime next year.

The service does have some 15,000 programs that are available on demand. But the selection is spotty. When I checked recently, DirecTV Now had the first episode of the current season of "The Walking Dead" available on demand, but none of the other six episodes that have already aired. By contrast, I could choose from four on-demand episodes of "Empire" and seven from "Project Runway."

With some networks, DirecTV Now also allows you to watch shows that have aired up to 72 hours prior to when you are tuning in. But again, the selection is hit and mostly miss. Fewer than half the networks it offers officially support the 72-hour lookback feature. And when I checked recently, many of the networks that do support the lookback feature didn't list any programs that I could actually watch. Kim said that shows available for lookback depend on many factors, including access rights, and AT&T expects the number to grow "in coming weeks."

Besides the lack of recording, another area where DirecTV Now comes up short is in search. Instead of helping you find something to watch, the search feature often makes it more difficult.

When I searched for "Modern Family," for example, DirecTV Now listed 64 results under "programs," all of which pointed to individual episodes. Of those, only one was a listing I could actually tune in right that second. The rest were either not actually "Modern Family" episodes or were episodes that were scheduled to run sometime in the future.

Listing those wasn't super-helpful, because I obviously couldn't set up the service to record them. Although DirecTV Now has a "watchlist" feature where you can create a list of your favorite shows, it doesn't allow you to add shows from the search results. I couldn't even set some kind of reminder that the shows were going air at a future time.

More broadly, I often found DirecTV Now's service difficult to navigate, at least on my Apple TV. It was hard to know for sure whether to access a particular feature, I was supposed to hit the menu button or swipe in a particular way across the touch-sensitive area of the Apple TV remote. Sometimes when I pressed the menu button, I was taken back to the Apple TV home screen. Often when I was trying to get to the channel guide, I found myself changing channels instead.

So, I wouldn't recommend DirecTV Now, at least not yet. It's great to have another alternative to cable TV, but this particular one needs more time to mature.

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DirecTV Now internet-streamed pay TV service bundle

Troy's Rating: 6.5 out of 10

Likes: Offers many of the top cable networks; offered as a month-to-month service rather than requiring a long-term contract; doesn't require pricey equipment rentals or time-consuming installation; can be tuned in via phones, tablets and televisions; relatively inexpensive.

Dislikes: Poor selection of local channels; missing some popular [cable channels](#), including NFL Network; lacks a recording function; on-demand and 72-hour lookback offerings spotty; search feature unhelpful; confusing interface.

Price: Plans range from \$35 a month for around 60 channels to \$70 a month for more than 120 channels. For a limited time, AT&T is offering the 100-channel "Go Big" plan for \$35 a month.

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