

Review: Attention, cord cutters: Tablo Dual brings DVR to your screens

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Recording TV shows for later viewing is something almost everyone who subscribes to pay TV can do.

Digital video recorders, or DVRs, use hard drives to store the shows so the user can watch later and even fast-forward through commercials. Services like cable, satellite, U-Verse and FIOS all have receivers that include DVRs.

What about cord cutters?

There are DVRs for over-the-air content. Some connect to individual TVs, and some are not connected to TVs at all but live on your network to be viewed on any connected screen inside or outside your home.

I've been reviewing a network-connected recorder called the Tablo Dual (\$249, www.tablotv.com) that is a two-tuner whole home solution for recording and watching over-the-air content.

SETUP

The Tablo Dual needs a feed from an over-the-air antenna. The choice of antenna and placement is up to you.

Because the Tablo Dual is a networked recorder, it doesn't connect directly to your TV, so you can place the antenna (and the Tablo) where it will get the best reception.

The Tablo Dual also needs to connect to your home's broadband internet network. The connection can be wired or wireless. I opted for a wired connection to my internet router for the best quality.

The Tablo Dual has 64 gigabytes of onboard storage for recording up to 40 hours of HD content, but it also has a USB port so you can add your own hard drive for expanded recording capacity. The Tablo Dual supports drives up to 8 terabytes.

You can't use flash drives or network-attached storage.

The Tablo Dual can record two shows at once, and it can serve up streams to up to six screens at a time, inside or outside your home's network.

You'll also need a computer or mobile device (iOS or Android smartphone or tablet) to set up the recorder.

You'll use a browser on your computer or the Tablo app on your phone or tablet to make sure the Tablo is on the network and to do an initial channel scan.

IN USE

Once the setup is complete, you can use almost any connected screen to watch the live and recorded content.

Here's the list of compatible screens and devices I copied from the Tablo website:

A smart TV powered by: Roku, or Android TV, or most LG WebOS 2.0 and 3.0 operating systems; OR

A set-top-box/streaming media device: Roku, Amazon Fire TV, AppleTV, Nvidia SHIELD, or Xiaomi MiBox; OR

A streaming stick: Roku stick, Amazon Fire TV stick, or a Chromecast dongle (casting from an Android device or Chrome browser); OR

A gaming system: Nvidia SHIELD or XBox One; OR

An HDMI-enabled computer: Tablo web app in Chrome/Safari

I watched on my Mac laptop with the Chrome browser, on my iPhone and an iPad using the Tablo iOS app, and I also watched on my TV using Apple TV and the Tablo app.

When you connect with the app or a browser, you can see a grid of what's on now and in the days to come. You can click on any channel to watch the live stream. You can choose to record the show, if you like.

If you see a show in the grid you'd like to record, you can choose to record just the one episode or upcoming episodes or all the episodes.

Once you start recording shows, you can choose to watch them from the Recordings tab.

There are other tabs for filtering movies, sports, prime time TV shows and manual recordings.

All the recorded shows are displayed in the list with nice cover art.

GUIDE DATA

The heart of any DVR is the guide data, and if there's one thing I've learned with DVRs, it's that guide data is rarely free.

The Tablo TV can be used with or without guide data, but I highly recommend subscribing to the guide data service for \$4.99 per month.

You can also choose to prepay yearly for \$49.99 or choose a lifetime subscription for \$149.99.

By the way, the subscription is not tied to a specific Tablo box, so if you buy lifetime guide data, you can upgrade your Tablo or even use the guide data on multiple Tablo boxes.

The paid subscription gets you two weeks of guide data, the ability to set series recordings, and the ability to stream your video content outside of your home network.

Without guide data, you get one day's worth of guide data, you only get to set up manual recordings, and you can only watch content over your local network.

My advice is to spring for the data if you're going to be a cord cutter for the long haul.

OTHER BOXES

Tablo also makes a dual-tuner box (Tablo-2, \$219.99) and a four-tuner box (Tablo-4, \$299.99) that have no built-in storage. These boxes work the same as the Tablo Dual, but to record any shows you'd need to provide your own hard drive.

CONCLUSION

The Tablo Dual is really a nice solution for receiving and recording OTA channels. Because you don't have to have the box directly connected to a TV, you can watch on any TV or connected device. I found myself

watching on my phone quite often.

The picture quality for live shows and recordings was very good, but of course that will depend on the placement of the antenna and the strength of the signal.

This is a nice DVR to add if you're a cord cutter. Some people will complain about the subscription price, but elegant solutions like the Tablo Dual usually require some type of ongoing cost. The fact that Tablo offers a lifetime subscription is a nice feature and a money saver if you will be using the service for a long time.

Pros: Good picture quality, can place the box anywhere on your network and watch from a variety of screens. Easy to set up.

Cons: Subscription adds to the overall cost.

Bottom Line: Really elegant whole home OTA DVR solution.

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