

Cutting the cord: Which cable TV alternatives make the grade

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When the average cost of a cable or satellite bill is \$85 to \$100 a month, is it any wonder that so many are cutting the cord?

This year alone, some 6 million people are expected to ditch satellite and cable, causing a major pain point for the providers of digital entertainment. Welcome many of the same companies (DirecTV and Dish Network), along with YouTube, Hulu and Sony, in a different sort of offer. A smaller collection of channels, along with broadcast TV locals, no equipment required, and an average price of around \$40 monthly. (Along with your internet subscription.)

Initially, cord cutters connected their laptops to a TV and went DIY style. But now, with the abundance of cheap tools to bring the Internet to TV—like via Amazon and Roku streaming sticks, which can be had for as little as \$20—online entertainment is mainstream.

As a service for the holidays, Talking Tech breaks down the offerings from DirecTV Now, Sling TV, YouTube TV, Sony PlayStation VUE and Hulu with Live TV, showcasing the different channels available, prices and pros and cons of each service.

There are many differences. SlingTV is the cheapest, but it's missing many channels unless you pay extra for them. And If you're a fan of Nickelodeon or PBS, you won't be able to see the kids' TV favorite on YouTubeTV, SlingTV, Sony PlayStation VUE or Hulu with Live TV, but you can get Nick with DirecTV Now. And if you have an Amazon

Fire TV Stick as your streaming device to bring Internet to your TV, you can't see YouTubeTV.

Here's how they rank:

YouTube TV

Price: \$39.99 for over 50 channels. Up to six accounts can access the programming for the monthly fee.

Includes: This offering from the No. 1 online video network includes the [broadcast networks](#), cable channels from Disney/ABC, NBCUniversal, Fox, AMC and Turner Broadcasting. Missing are Viacom (Nickelodeon, MTV, Comedy Central), Discovery (Discovery Channel, Animal Planet) and PBS. However, the workaround here is that these networks put lots of clips from their shows on the YouTube website, but you won't be able to see the entire shows.

Works with: Roku, Apple and Chromecast, smart TVs from Samsung, LG, Vizio and Sony, as well as the Xbox One video game console. Note the big omission is Amazon Fire TV, due to a corporate spat between Amazon and YouTube owner Google.

Cloud DVR: No storage limits; you can keep the shows for up to nine months.

Pros: The most consumer-friendly terms (up to six screens, no DVR storage limits), best program guide navigation, easiest one-click for adding shows to DVR record list. Terrific app that makes it easy to watch the TV shows from bedroom, living room, office, park—anywhere. Plus, if YouTube TV doesn't have your show, the main YouTube website probably does have some variation of it. There's enough to keep you busy for days. The No. 1 choice for cord

cutters—unless you live in an Amazon world. In which case,, buy a Roku streaming stick and get YouTube that way. It's that good.

Cons: When you record a show on YouTube, it's with the expectation that you can watch it the way a cord cutter would want to—with the ability to fast forward through commercials. But some shows come in as video-on-demand versions—and no functionality to zip through the ads.. YouTube needs to be clearer about what you're getting, as cable DVRs don't put you through this torture.

Our grade: A

Hulu with Live TV

Price: \$39.99 for 50 channels on two screens, or add \$14.99 monthly for unlimited screens.

Includes: All the broadcast networks and most of the cable outlets.

Missing in action: Viacom channels (Nickelodeon, MTV and Comedy Central), PBS and the Hallmark Channel.

Works with: Apple TV, Google Chromecast, Amazon Fire TV Stick, Fire TV Edition and the Echo Show video speaker, Nintendo Switch, Xbox 360 and One, Samsung smart TVs.

Cloud DVR: Record up to 50 hours, pay \$15 extra monthly for up to 200 hours.

Pros: Easy-on-the-eyes interface that makes it simple to find what you're looking for. It does a really good job with suggestions of other shows you'd want to see. Our No. 2 choice, after YouTube. And good news, it works everywhere.

Cons: Again, too many of the DVR-recorded shows are video-on-demand and don't offer fast-forward tools. These need to be better labeled.

Our grade: B+

Sony PlayStation Vue

Price: \$44.95 monthly for just under 50 channels.

Includes: The streaming service named for the popular Sony video game system has most of the broadcast TV and cable channels you'd want.

Missing in action: Viacom (Comedy Central, MTV, Nickelodeon) and PBS.

Works with: Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV, Roku and Google Chromecast. No, you don't need a Sony PlayStation gaming console for Vue.

DVR rules: Saves programs for up to 28 days; no fast-forwarding with recorded Fox shows.

Pro: Works on all the major devices, interacts very well with Amazon-branded Fire TV Edition smart TVs.

Con: Program menu is hard to read, seems stuck in the past, very cable-like. Odd search; you can't type by name, but instead by pre-designed letter. Most expensive of the services.

Our grade: B

DirecTV Now

Price: \$39.99 for 65+ channels, on up to two accounts. A third account can be added for extra \$5 monthly.

Includes: The skinny bundle from the folks who brought you the DirecTV satellite service—the most expensive of any of the pay TV offerings—has the widest network selection. The four broadcast networks and cable outlets are here, along with channels from Disney/ABC, Fox, Discovery, Viacom, NBCUniversal, Turner and more. Missing: PBS.

Works with: Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV, Google Chromecast, Samsung smart TVs and tablets from Apple and Android.

Cloud DVR: 20 hours, stored for up to 30 days. Pay extra \$10 monthly for up to 100 hours, stored for 90 days.

Pro: Most channels with fewest (only one we could find) omissions.

Con: The menu is confusing and cable-like, and 20 hours for DVR is pretty skimpy.

Our grade: B

Sling TV

Price: Starts at \$25 for up to three screens.

Includes: From the folks who brought you the Dish Network for satellite viewing, Sling has a skinnier color-coded [channel](#) lineup than others. The "Orange" offering has some popular channels, like ESPN, CNN and Comedy Central, but it's missing big ones like CBS, ABC and PBS. The "Blue" offering, also for \$25, has a more sports-oriented lineup. (You can get both Blue and Orange combined for \$40 monthly.) Many

favorites may be missing from "Blue" or "Orange" for you. For instance, if you like MSNBC and CNBC, you'll have to pay \$5 more monthly for the "News Extra:" package. To get TCM, look for the Hollywood Extra package, MTV and TV Land are in the Comedy extra offering. All add \$5 each monthly. Nickelodeon is missing from all of them.

Works with: Apple TV, Roku, Amazon, Chromecast, select LG and Samsung smart TVs and the XboxOne video game console.

Cloud DVR: Extra, for \$5 monthly, up to 50 hours of recordings.

Pro: The pricing. Sling has the lowest rates. If you want only a handful of channels, this is the best deal you'll get—if you can find your favorite networks.

Con: The pricing. The most confusing of all the offerings. What seems like the best rates may not look so good once you've figured out that you have to tack on extras to get what you need. And boo-hiss on the extra charge for the DVR. Additionally, Sling is the only one of the cable alternatives mentioned here that doesn't offer the complete roster of broadcast networks. CBS and ABC are huge omissions. Because of all the negatives, SlingTV would be the last choice on this list.

Our grade: C

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