

Review: YouTube TV could use some more time in production

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A YouTube video by an enterprising 14-year-old showcasing the talents of his laid-off dad, a Florida-based marketing specialist, has scored thousands of hits and several job interviews.

You've probably used YouTube to watch short clips from Hollywood films, instructional videos or goofy home-made movies. Now you can use it to watch something else: live and recorded cable programming.

Whether you'll want to, though, is an open question.

Earlier this month, Google's video unit became the latest company to launch a low-cost, no-commitment, internet-delivered pay TV service. Dubbed YouTube TV, the service offers access to some 40 channels for \$35 a month.

That's a fair price and YouTube TV has some cool features. But it feels

half-baked - it's missing key networks, is only available in certain areas of the country and isn't compatible with many devices.

Not that long ago, if you wanted to watch cable TV programming, you had to sign up for a pricey, long-term commitment to a service from one of the satellite companies or your local cable or telephone provider. Over the last two years, though, more companies have jumped into the market, offering so-called "skinny bundles" of channels. Instead of the hundreds of networks you get with a traditional pay TV package, these new services offer a few dozen, generally representing the most popular ones.

The new services typically cost between \$20 and \$40 and unlike the typical cable TV package, don't require consumers to sign a long-term contract. Instead, they can sign up for service one month and cancel it the next.

When it comes to such online pay TV services, you can now choose from Dish's Sling TV, AT&T's DirecTV Now and Sony's PlayStation Vue. Hulu plans to launch a similar service later this year.

Now YouTube is joining this party. YouTube TV subscribers can cancel at any time and can tune in to the service on their computers, tablets or smartphones. As an added incentive, YouTube is offering the first month free.

As you might expect from a service offered by Google, much of YouTube TV's service is built around its search feature and around offering recommendations based on what it knows about users. While you can access a version of the traditional programming grid, showing what's on at that moment, Google attempts to use other ways to highlight items you might be interested in watching.

On YouTube TV's home screen, the service offers live previews of some shows that are airing then based on their popularity with other viewers; recommends shows to record based on other shows you're already recording; highlights on-demand movies you may be interested in; and links to recent episodes of some of your favorite shows. You'll also find previews of other types of programs that are live, including sports games and talk shows; and links to popular programs.

YouTube officials say that the more you use the service, the more it will customize the home screen to your tastes.

The company's search screen also helps to point users quickly to shows they might want to watch. On the screen, you'll find buttons for particular types of genres of shows and for particular networks. If you want to watch a comedy show, you can find one without typing anything by just tapping on the "comedy" button on that screen.

But you can also type in other things to watch, including sports teams, actors' names and types of shows. In the search results, you'll find lists of shows, recent episodes and typically an easy way to start recording a particular program. I searched for the Spurs - my favorite NBA basketball team - and was able to quickly set YouTube TV up to record every Spurs game that airs on the service, something that's frequently difficult to do with other TV services.

YouTube TV has some other features that help it stand out. Perhaps the best is its cloud-based DVR. Subscribers can record and store an unlimited amount of programming on Google's servers for up to nine months. That's a much better deal than you'll get with the rival online pay TV services, which either don't have DVR yet or limit how many hours you can record or allow you to store them for much shorter periods.

Also, subscribers can link up to six different users to one account, and each of those users can have their own DVR and set their favorite programs. However, only three of those users can be watching their programs simultaneously.

All of this shows promise. Eventually, YouTube TV could be a really great service. But not yet.

Right now, YouTube is only offering the service in the Bay Area and four other metro areas in the country. If you don't live in one of those places, you're out of luck. YouTube officials say the company will "soon" offer the service in other markets, but won't say when.

Even if you do live in a place where the service is offered, you may not find the shows you want to watch. Right now, YouTube TV doesn't include AMC, BBC America or Telemundo, among other networks. The company says it will be adding those channels and a few others - again, it won't say when - but YouTube TV will still be lacking other popular ones. Among them: CNN, TBS, TNT, Comedy Central, Lifetime and PBS.

And the service has another big limitation. If you want to watch it on your television, you have to use one of Google's Chromecast adapters or a TV that has Chromecast built into it. YouTube TV doesn't support other smart TVs or popular digital media players such as Apple TV, Roku's devices or Amazon Fire. YouTube officials say that support is coming. Meanwhile, the company, for a limited time, is offering subscribers a free Chromecast device when they pay for their first month's worth of service.

Users also might be uncomfortable with sharing even more of their personal information with Google. In order for YouTube TV to offer recommendations or remember where you last stopped while watching a

recorded show, you have to allow Google to track what you're watching, information it can combine with the other information it knows about you for marketing purposes. You can expect all the online pay TV services to track what you're watching, of course, but few likely have as much data on you already as does Google.

If that doesn't bother you, you should take a look at YouTube TV. But I'd hold off signing up for it until Google bakes it a bit longer.

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YouTube TV internet-streamed pay TV service

Troy's rating: 7 out of 10

Likes: Includes a cloud-based DVR with unlimited recording space; supports up to six users on one account, with the ability to stream to three of them at once; easy to set favorite shows or to record games played by favorite sports teams; personalized recommendations; offers free first month trial.

Dislikes: Offered in only five metro areas nationwide; missing many popular networks; only way to watch on your TV is using Chromecast; ads to the already large amounts of personal data Google is collecting on users.

Price: \$35 a month.

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