

Crossing the Digital Divide (v48)

“TV OD”

By Joseph Feigon for the Observer

Sometime in the last Century, there was a band called “The Norml”. They had one hit: TV-OD. The words: *TV OD, TV OD, I don't need no screen in front of me, just plug that cable into my vein and watch the images on my brain.*

Streaming services are finally starting to replace cable as the go-to destination for hot shows, but broadcast TV still has one major advantage over its online counterpart: live television. The fact is, watching the latest news, sports or hit shows as soon as they're broadcast can be difficult without a paid TV subscription. However, it's not impossible. If you want to watch live TV online, you have more than a dozen options, depending on what you want to watch. Read on to find live TV on your computer, mobile device or set-top box.

Cable Replacement Services

If you thrive on live TV but don't want to pay exorbitant cable costs, a cable-replacement service might be the way to go. These streaming programs are just like cable or satellite subscriptions, complete with live broadcasts and a variety of familiar channels, except they come over the Internet rather than through analog cables or satellite signals. Sling TV and Playstation Vue are currently the most recognizable of these services, and the two are fairly similar in practice. Sling TV lets you watch channels like ESPN, AMC, Cartoon Network, HBO and Univision. PlayStation Vue offers channels like Bravo, Fox News, Nickelodeon and USA. Both services have dozens more channels available, and you can watch them all in real time, just as you would on a standard cable subscription.

Because Sling TV and PlayStation Vue provide regular broadcast networks like CBS and Fox, they are arguably the most complete live TV replacement you can get online. They don't come cheap, though.

A basic Sling TV package costs \$20 per month and gives you about two dozen channels. You can add more, but prices and the number of channels vary, from 14

Spanish channels for \$5 per month, up to HBO alone for \$15 per month. Sling also offers its basic packages in multiple configuration options, and charge \$40 per month if you want added content. The cheapest PlayStation Vue subscription will run you \$50 per month for 50-plus channels. Prices run up to \$75 per month if you want more than 100 channels, although both selection and pricing vary by region.

Stand-Alone Network Subscriptions

When streaming video first started to take off, analysts and fans alike predicted that someday, viewers would be able to simply purchase channels à la carte over the Internet. This hasn't happened across the board yet, but companies are slowly working toward it, with both broadcast networks and premium channels offering stand-alone subscriptions.

CBS All-Access(\$6 per month) is one of the only major networks to go completely streaming, with access to both live TV and recorded programs. The service is still relatively new, but CBS is putting a lot of faith in the program, including a promise to broadcast the upcoming Star Trek series exclusively on All Access. Other networks will likely follow suit in the near future.

Premium channels have actually been quicker to adopt this strategy than their network counterparts. HBO Now (\$15 per month), Showtime (\$11 per month) and Starz (\$9 per month) offer both live and recorded versions of the TV channels.

Live News

Whether you watch Orange is the new Black when it airs or a week later, the story is still going to be the same. Breaking news, however, is different. Cable-replacement services provide stations like CNN and Fox News, while HD antenna rebroadcasting boxes and stand-alone network subscriptions can play broadcast news, as described above.

There are a few other options, if you insist on getting news for free (or at least much, much cheaper). Services like Sky News, Post TV and Bloomberg TV are available on set-top boxes like Roku and Amazon Fire TV, and these stations play live news from anywhere between a few hours and a full 24 hours each day. Most set-top-box app stores have a News section, where you can learn more about your choices.

For those who want something on a smaller level, lots of local news programs on broadcast networks (like Fox 5 News at 11 in New York City, for example) play for free online. Simply visit your local affiliate's website, find the news section and see if it offers a live stream. It probably does, although many of them function only on computers, rather than mobile devices or set-top boxes.

Sports

Live sporting events are generally preferred to recorded games. Luckily, most sports are easy to stream live. Almost every major sports organization in the United States has its own streaming service, from MLB.tv (\$130 per season) to NBA League Pass (\$100 per season) to NFL Live (\$100/season).

Signing up for a streaming sports service is as simple as visiting your preferred sport league's website and clicking on the Streaming or Watch Online section. Prices tend to vary, depending on how many games you want to watch and how many teams you want to follow, but you can expect to spend about \$100 per year. You can even watch some big games, such as the SuperBowl, for free.

There is, however, one big caveat: Due to licensing agreements, the streaming services cannot show games covered by your local stations. You'll need to stick with an HD antenna (and possibly one of the rebroadcasting devices) for that.

For Cable Subscribers

If you haven't cut the cord yet, you can watch live TV online very easily. DVR boxes from companies like Slingbox, Chromecast, Roku, Apple TV, TiVo, Dish, Verizon and lots of other providers can usually stream content from your primary TV to a computer or mobile device. The ways of doing so vary, depending on whether your box is from your service provider or a third party. But if you have a cable or satellite subscription, you have lots of options.

It's even easier to use apps for channels directly. Tons of paid channels, from Nickelodeon to FX to Syfy to National Geographic, have apps on mobile and streaming devices that only work (or only work at full capacity) if your cable provider gives you access. This could allow you to watch your favorite shows on the go, or simply buy a

streaming box for a secondary TV rather than rent a second cable box at an exorbitant fee.

Bottom Line

Currently, the best way to watch live TV online is — ironically — to have an existing cable or satellite subscription. Slowly but surely, though, cord cutters are gaining access to real-time channels in addition to pre-recorded content. Live TV could be the next big frontier for streaming video, but until then, watching shows as they happen requires a little dedication and creativity.

(Substantial portions of the above article first appeared in Tom's Guide, and was written by Marshall Honorof)