

Daily Times
3 Reasons You Should Be Investing in Live-Streaming

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Aereo tried it, and ended up being shut down by the justices of the US Supreme Court. Apple's Tim Cook keeps threatening to try it, saying it's a "terrible, broken" process to watch TV.

I agree. And for this Aereo-lover, it is the new Stream TV from Comcast Corp. – yes, that Comcast Corp., the bloated cable monopoly that everyone loves to hate – that has come closest to delivering streaming television to the masses, legally and affordably.

Comcast rolled out its Stream TV service across the Boston area earlier this month in preparation for a nationwide rollout next year. For \$15 a month, customers get a "skinny bundle" of 28 channels, including all the broadcast networks, all the HBO channels, several Spanish language channels, and a smattering of a few others. No ESPN, no NESN, no Disney, no TNT. None of the hundreds of cooking shows, animal channels, and sports stations that most cable companies force you to bundle into your expensive cable packages.

Let's get its shortcomings out of the way first. Here's what Aereo could do (for just \$8.95 a month, by the way) that Stream TV doesn't do yet:

- Portability: The ability to watch your Stream TV package wherever you happen to be. For now, you have to watch it in the home where you pay for our Xfinity Internet service, a major drawback for people who travel a lot, or who want to access shows from work, vacation, or wherever.
- Scalability: For now, Comcast does not allow users to beam channels from one of their small screens – mobile phone, tablet, or laptop – to a larger television monitor, using an Apple TV or similar device.
- Interruptibility: I was unable to pause a stream midplay, if a phone call came in or I was otherwise distracted.

Comcast says most or all of these issues will be fixed in the near future. "This is just the beginning of the evolution of what Stream is going to be," says Lisa Scalzo, Comcast's senior director for corporate communications.

Enough grumbling. For cord-cutters and millennials, Stream is the service you're looking for, once these issues get resolved.

Signup is a snap, though the signup screen is pretty buried on the Xfinity site at the moment (here it is). Since it's available only to those with Comcast Internet service, the company already has created an account for you; it's a simple matter to log in, and add Stream to your services. No contracts, no commitments; people can sign in, start watching in minutes, and quit whenever they want, with no penalty. No cable guy required. On a laptop, that's all you need to do; on mobile devices, users must also download the Xfinity TV for X1 app and sign in to their accounts.

The package of channels pops up on the screen, but be forewarned – here's where a little of the cable legacy shows. The "channels" are arranged numerically, by the channel numbers assigned to your cable service. Isn't that quaint? The listings also include both the HD and non-HD versions of network channels, though it's a mystery why anyone on a device would want anything but HD. With a little hunting, I found that Comcast includes a filter to display just HD channels, and that cleaned up the listings nicely.

And what do you get? The big advantage, especially in the fall, especially as the Patriots march through the season undefeated, is the NFL. Leagues like the NFL are very protective of their rights, shutting down illegal streamers as fast as they can find them, and setting up all kinds of barriers to access their games. For instance, Verizon customers are supposed to be able to see NFL games for free on the NFL app, but viewing is limited to smartphone screens; I can't even get it to work on my iPad. Customers who want to view games on the big screen have to buy the package of all NFL (or MLB or NBA or NHL games) to see their hometown teams, as the leagues work hard to protect local broadcast rights.

For the casual fan, who wants to participate in water-cooler conversation at work, Stream TV provides just enough sports. Plus all the live events that generate chatter and remain on the broadcast networks, like the Emmys.

Setting up recordings of favorite shows took a little practice to get right. Comcast says Stream TV allows recording of up to 20 hours. Ten hours of television can be downloaded to a device to watch on a plane or somewhere without a strong Internet connection.

Having the HBO channels and all of their buzzy content on Stream TV – “Game of Thrones,” “Girls,” “Silicon Valley,” and the like – is a big plus. Combining HBO's movie offerings with a Netflix subscription and the occasional one-off rentals from iTunes makes for a decent TV-and-movie package for \$30 or so a month.

The biggest drawback? None of these shows can be displayed on the biggest screen in the house, where they were meant to be seen. A big error message popped across my tablet and smartphone every time I tried to send the signal to my Apple TV. Comcast promises that this problem will be solved in the near future.

In the meantime, Comcast says, the Stream TV login and password will work with all the networks that have their own apps on Apple TV – WatchABC, HBO Go, and the like. In practice, it worked just some of the time. ABC worked in initial testing, HBO didn't, though Comcast quickly fixed the HBO problem.

Comcast says big-screen viewing is coming, along with the ability to mix and match premium packs and add-ons – a sports package, perhaps, or a kids package. “This is really just the beginning for Stream,” Scalzo says. “We've been trying to tell people for a long time that we're a different company. This is our opportunity to prove that.” – ***The Boston Globe***



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