

The best streaming services in 2021

By [Henry T. Casey](#)

Our picks for the best streaming services and cable alternatives for those considering cord cutting

The best streaming services continue to evolve. Amazon Prime Video looks to ascend up the list now that it acquired MGM, HBO Max is introducing an ad-free tier that's pretty good and Disney Plus is finally getting the Spider-Man movies. The only real concern is that there are too many streaming services, and you may wind up paying for many more services than you're actually using.

And that's not to mention the live TV entries in our best streaming services list, which help you cut the cord. All of our picks only bill you on a month-to-month basis (though they offer annual deals), which give you the flexibility to cancel and resubscribe as you see fit. This way, when you run out of stuff to watch on Netflix, you can cut the cord (and then come back when the next season of one of your favorites comes back).

These services are just one half of the streaming equation, though. As the cable box slowly withers away, it's being replaced by smart TVs and the best streaming devices, which include Roku and Chromecast.

And by testing the best streaming services and devices side-by-side, we figure out the best way to build the ultimate streaming setup with the best selection of content and live channels.

What are the best streaming services?

The best streaming service overall *was* Netflix, but HBO Max just took the title here at Tom's Guide, riding a stellar wave of successes in 2021 with big-name movies. If you're confused by the new name, consider the "Max" in HBO Max to be akin to the Plus in Disney Plus (which is more than just Disney movies). HBO Max now has a lower starting price, with a \$9.99 per month option that has ads.

BEST STREAMING SERVICES AT A GLANCE — STARTING PRICES

1. HBO Max (\$9.99 per month)
2. Netflix (\$8.99 per month)
3. Disney Plus (\$7.99 per month)
4. Hulu (\$5.99 per month)
5. Sling TV (\$35 per month)
6. Amazon Prime Video (\$119 per year)
7. Fubo TV (\$64.99 per month)
8. Crackle (free)

Not all of us are cancelling our Netflix accounts, though, as the big red streaming machine practically controls the conversation around streaming, with most of the big shows (which it keeps doing, hand over fist, with hit after hit) and routine success making big new series such as Tiger King and Dead to Me. Netflix has also had most of the standard features that competitors took years to realize mattered. and it's enough content that you've got plenty of reasons to sign up.

Sling TV is one of the best streaming services for live TV because of its relatively inexpensive price. While it got a price bump to \$35 (from \$30) in January, that's just for new members — and it's also \$30 less than the likes of YouTube TV and Hulu with Live TV. Fubo TV may be as expensive, but its wide array of sports content helps it stand out.

The best streaming services now

(Image credit: Tom's Guide)

1. HBO Max

The best streaming service around is the home box office

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$9.99 per month

Simultaneous streams: 3

Live TV: No

Exclusive originals: Yes

Platforms and devices: Amazon Fire, Roku, Android, Android TV, Apple TV, Chromecast, iPhone, iPad, iPod touch, PlayStation 4, Macs and PCs, Samsung Smart TV, Xbox One, TiVo

REASONS TO BUY

+Award-winning original programming+Top-tier movies+Original news programming

REASONS TO AVOID

-Pricey-Content phases out frequently

HBO Max has everything HBO had, and then some. Both HBO and HBO Max pack current-run shows including Insecure, as well as completed seasons of Westworld, Curb Your Enthusiasm and Veep. But for \$14.99 per month (or \$9.99 with ads, and no big Warner movies), [HBO Max](#) adds a lot more to be a compelling competitor to Netflix. Big highlights include Wonder Woman 1984 and The Flight Attendant with Kaley Cuoco. There's also Friends, the Studio Ghibli library and original shows like Made for Love. HBO Max has found a second life, though, as Warner Brothers Pictures' destination for its biggest movies in 2021.

The likes of James Gunn's The Suicide Squad (which will get an HBO Max spinoff show called The Peacemaker), Dune, Godzilla vs Kong and Space Jam 2 are delivering serious

reasons to sign up. The only downsides with HBO Max have been its relatively higher price than most, those weird (now fixed) Apple TV bugs and that Warner movies won't launch on Day 1 in 2022.

2. Netflix

Still one of the best streaming services, but looking for its next hit

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$9 per month

Simultaneous streams: 1-4

Live TV: No

Exclusive originals: Yes

Platforms and devices: Android, iOS, web browsers, Apple TV, Chromecast, Fire TV, Nvidia Shield, Roku, Smart TVs, PS4, Xbox, set top boxes,

REASONS TO BUY

+Excellent selection+Optimized interface+Good recommendation system

REASONS TO AVOID

-More expensive than other services-Titles come and go frequently

The great-granddaddy in the market remains the best streaming service. As you probably know, [Netflix](#) provides unlimited streaming of TV shows, movies, comedy specials (check out Bo Burnham's Inside) and original programming (we need The Witcher and Stranger Things back now) for one monthly subscription fee. Netflix is constantly adding and taking away movies. Recently, it's been easy to see that Netflix is inching away from its original business model of distributing other studios' films and shows, in favor of these above originals. Still, though, we see frequent additions of licensed shows, such as Hannibal, Moesha and Community, making Netflix the home for those looking to catch up on beloved shows they missed the first time around.

3. Disney Plus

The best streaming service for families

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$8 per month

Simultaneous streams: 4

Live TV: No

Exclusive originals: Yes

Platforms and devices: Amazon Fire TV and Fire tablets, Roku, Chromecast, iOS, iPadOS, Android, Android TV, Apple TV, Xbox, PlayStation 4, Android-based Sony Smart TVs, Chromebooks, Samsung and LG devices

REASONS TO BUY

+Reasonable price+Lots of beloved content+UHD resolution options

REASONS TO AVOID

-Odd gaps in content lineup

Disney Plus is a dominant player in the category, and why wouldn't it be? Disney controls a frankly frightening number of properties, from Marvel, to Star Wars, to Disney's own animated canon, to The Simpsons (all 30 seasons, and counting). At \$8 per month, it's among the cheaper of the best streaming services out there, and a lot of the content is available in 4K resolution with HDR color palettes, too.

Oh, and in big news, Disney Plus is also being turned into a PPV service, or at least the company is testing the waters. Disney's live-action Mulan cost \$30 from Sept. 4 until its December 2020 free release, and, thankfully, they're doing the same with Black Widow. The Mandalorian season 2 and WandaVision got rave reviews, and Loki is the service's biggest hit yet. Fans of Disney, Marvel, Pixar and/or Star Wars have no choice but to subscribe, which makes Disney Plus one of the best streaming services.

4. Hulu

The best streaming service for cord-cutters

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$6 per month

Simultaneous streams: 2

Live TV: Requires \$65 per month Live TV package

Exclusive originals: Yes

Platforms and devices: Android, Android TV, Apple TV, Chromecast, Echo Show, Fire Tablets, Fire TV, iPhones and iPads, LG TV (select models), Nintendo Switch, Mac and PC, PlayStation 3 (no live programming), PlayStation 4, Roku, Samsung TV (select models), VIZIO SmartCast TVs, Xbox, Xfinity Flex & X1

REASONS TO BUY

+Great selection of current TV+Inexpensive+Quality original programming

REASONS TO AVOID

-Frequent commercials-Inconsistent selections from older TV seasons

If you want to keep current with the latest TV shows but don't feel like investing in a cable subscription or an HD antenna, Hulu is the best streaming service for you. This service

provides access to most major network shows (aside from CBS' programs) and a handful of cable shows the day after they air. It also lets subscribers access a show's current season — or often all of the program's seasons.

In addition, the service hosts a number of original shows (including joint ventures with the BBC, like *The Wrong Mans* and season 4 of *The Thick of It*), a selection of offbeat movies and a surprising amount of classic anime series. Recent Hulu hits include a remake of *High Fidelity* that brings the record shop to New York, and swaps John Cusack out for Zoe Kravitz (which got cancelled, RIP). Even with a paid subscription, you have to sit through commercials, but far fewer than if you watched the same shows on cable. Hulu's live TV streaming option is also a solid aspect of its overall package, and that will let you watch CBS too.

5. Sling TV

The best live TV streaming service

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$35 per month (\$30 for existing)

Simultaneous streams: 1-4

Live TV: Yes

Exclusive originals: No

Platforms and devices: Fire TV, Apple TV, Chromecast, Roku, iPhone and iPad, web browsers, Android, Android TV, Xbox, Samsung Smart TVs, LG Smart TVs and VIZIO Smart TVs

REASONS TO BUY

+Much cheaper than cable+Wide breadth of content+No contract required

REASONS TO AVOID

-Limited on-demand content-Gets expensive very fast with optional packages

If you like the idea of a cable subscription but feel it's just too expensive and offers more content than you want, Sling TV might provide a happy medium for you. On paper, Sling sounds a lot like a traditional cable service: Pay a monthly subscription fee in exchange for about 30 real-time channels. But there's no contract and no set-top box rental fee. Sling is especially handy for sports fans, as it offers a variety of ESPN channels — and this alone is worth the price for some.

Other popular networks, like NBC, BBC America, CNN, Cartoon Network, TBS and the Food Network, sweeten the deal. While most of the popular streaming services start at around \$65, Sling stands out with its \$35 per month starting price. That price isn't for existing subscribers, whose \$30 per month starting price is locked in until the end of summer 2021. And all this flexibility guarantees Sling a spot as one of the best streaming services.

6. Amazon Prime Video

The best streaming service you're already paying for

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$119 per year

Simultaneous streams: 3

Live TV: No

Exclusive originals: Yes

Platforms and devices: Fire TV, Fire tablet, iPhone, iPad, Chromecast, Xbox, PlayStation 4, Smart TVs, Blu-ray players, Apple TV, Roku, Xfinity X1

REASONS TO BUY

+Wide content selection+Included with other Prime benefits+Good original shows

REASONS TO AVOID

-Not available on some platforms-A la carte content costs extra

For those who do most of their shopping online, Amazon Prime is a no-brainer. For \$119 per year, you get free two-day shipping on your purchases, a free Kindle book each month, and unlimited access to both Amazon Music and Amazon Prime Video. Like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video is a veritable buffet of movies, television and original programming (the [best Amazon shows](#) range from The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, The Man in the High Castle, Bosch and Jack Ryan). Amazon Prime Video's biggest hit is The Boys, which grew its audience tremendously in season 2, and already has its own spinoff announced.

Thanks to a deal with Viacom — which controls Comedy Central, MTV and Nickelodeon — Amazon Prime arguably is the best streaming service when it comes to comedy and children's programming. The service also offers unlimited access to an extensive collection from HBO's back catalog of classics such as The Sopranos and The Wire. You can also rent or purchase movies through Amazon Prime Video, but it's an à la carte service.

7. Fubo TV

The best streaming service for sports aficionados

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: \$65 per month

Simultaneous streams: 2-3

Live TV: Yes

Exclusive originals: No

Platforms and devices: Fire TV, Android, Android TV, Apple TV, Mac and PC web browsers, Chromecast, iPhone, iPad, Roku, Samsung Smart TVs

REASONS TO BUY

+Huge number of channels+Niche sports networks+Some 4K content

REASONS TO AVOID

-More expensive than competitors-No ABC/ESPN

Fubo TV is one of the best streaming services for anyone looking to have access to live sports without an actual cable subscription. Fubo's standard plan is \$64.99 and offers 120-plus channels, including almost every major broadcast and cable network. And unlike other live TV streaming competitors like YouTube TV and Sling TV, Fubo has 4K streaming for select content on demand. The other knock against Fubo, besides its higher price, is the limited Cloud DVR storage.

While Fubo's channel lineup is the largest among the higher-priced streamers, they just got a major pair of gaps filled, including ABC and ESPN. By adding ESPN, Fubo makes itself the top streaming service for NFL fans, offering all the major broadcast networks, and the NFL Network too. In addition, the lineup includes popular networks like NBC, Fox, AMC, Food Network, MTV and Syfy, as well as a ton of niche sports channels. Its only big sports flaw is TNT, which is a must for NBA playoffs.

8. Crackle

One of the best free streaming services

SPECIFICATIONS

Starting price: Free

Simultaneous streams: N/A

Live TV: No

Exclusive originals: Yes

Platforms and devices: Chromecast, Fire TV, Apple TV, web browsers, Roku, Xbox, Android, Android TV, iPhone and iPad, LG TVs, Samsung Smart TVs, PlayStation 4, Vizio TVs

REASONS TO BUY

+Free+Amusing content+Good variety of videos

REASONS TO AVOID

-Lots of commercials-Videos rotate very frequently

If you yearn for the halcyon days of cheesy action movies and anime on afternoon cable, Crackle will take you back in time at no cost. The Sony-owned platform broadcasts movies, TV shows and original programming on a rotating basis. There's no subscription or à la carte fee, although you do have to sit through a fair amount of commercials. While the programming is not usually blockbuster material, it's stuff you've heard of — think Total

Recall rather than The Terminator, or Pitch Black rather than Riddick. Some of the original shows are good, too.

Crackle originals include Snatch, an adaptation of the Guy Ritchie film, which stars Rupert Grint (yes, Ron Weasley himself). Adam Brody starred in StartUp, Keegan-Michael Key did voice work in the animated Supermansion, and even Chad Michael Murray showed up for CH:OS:EN. There's even Rob Riggle's Ski Master Academy, which bears resemblance to what would happen if you made a real life show out of Archer.

How to choose the best streaming services for you

The good news is that you don't need to limit yourself to just one. It's all about picking the number of services that's right for your budget. And to that matter, all depends on the content you want to consume. While Netflix has a diverse array of content, it's not appealing to any specific audience — which means it's probably a service that most people have.

While Netflix is pivoting more to original shows and movies with each passing week, it's still constantly adding licensed movies and shows. That means it's not only the place you'll re-watch The Good Place, but it's also got its own hits like Glow and Love Is Blind.

Alternatively, do not sleep on HBO Max. Not only does the service get top-tier movies, but it's continually getting some of the latest and greatest and most prestigious TV shows, such as Watchmen and The Outsider.

How we test streaming services

Testing streaming services is both serious work and good fun. When we test the quality of these platforms, we use them on multiple devices, including game consoles, web browsers and mobile devices. You'd be surprised at how differently Sling TV can look between a Roku, the Apple TV box and Chrome.

We then compare the services based around the number of simultaneous streams they allow, if they throw in 4K streaming for free (or charge extra), and what other special features they allow. And as pricing constantly changes (not in the right way, most of the time), we have to rethink how each competitor sits in the landscape. Sling, for example, has stayed near the low-end of the field, even though it too has gone up over time.

We also spend a fair amount of time keeping up with the latest entrants into the streaming wars. A newer live TV streaming service is [Philo TV](#), which costs just \$20 a month for 59 channels.

One of the biggest new names in streaming is NBCU's [Peacock](#). Its strategy is simple: free ad-supported content you love, but the debate over NBC [Peacock Free vs Premium](#) might be an easy question depending on how July's nation-wide launch goes. Peacock has The

Office, SNL and much more, plus it's the exclusive home for many Premier League soccer games and the WWE Network.

[HBO Max](#) arrived with the WarnerMedia library (including Friends), but its biggest feature is that it will get huge blockbuster movies on the same day they arrive in theaters. This started with Wonder Woman 1984.

While [Apple TV Plus](#) hasn't risen to the ranks of the best streaming services, it's still got Ted Lasso, one of the best shows of the last year (if not the very best). And did you know that [AT&T TV](#) isn't a month-to-month subscription service? It's a really weird offering that feels like it's stuck in the past.