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Kill Your Cable TV Bill Dead

Cable television bills are climbing, but our (nearly) free-TV plan will keep you watching streaming digital video on your PC, TV, or HDTV.

By Rick Broida, [InformationWeek](#)

April 13, 2009

URL: <http://www.informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=216403591>

Some monthly bills are unavoidable: gas, electric, water, phone. But the [cable](#) bill? Avoidable.

No, we're not suggesting you forgo *Lost*, *30 Rock*, *American Idol*, or any of your other favorite shows. (After all, you need *something* to take your mind off the fact that you can no longer afford cable!) But if you're willing to make a few changes to how, when, and where you watch TV, you can tell the cable company to take its ever-expanding monthly fees and stuff 'em.

Well, for TV, anyway. Much of our free-TV plan involves streaming video, which means you'll need [broadband](#) Internet. For most people, that means cable. DSL will do, but [streaming video](#) requires all the [bandwidth](#) it can get, and most DSL pipes are relatively thin. Thus, [DSL](#) subscribers should test the waters before pulling the cable-TV plug.

Either way, it's not uncommon for TV service alone to run \$100 per month, meaning you stand to save up to \$1,200 annually. That's a serious chunk of change. So whether you're strapped for cash or just tired of Big Cable charging more when you're earning less, read on to learn the tricks of the nearly-free-TV trade.

Break Out The Rabbit Ears

Once upon a time, TV was free. Really! It traveled through the air and arrived in your living room without that big, fat cable bill attached. Well, guess what: It still travels through the air, and now does so digitally, in high def, and in some cases with 5.1-channel surround sound.

In other words, with little more than a decent antenna, your HDTV can tune in local HD channels (which for most folks means ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, PBS, and possibly The CW), and the cost to you is zero dollars. That's the good news. The bad news is that digital signals aren't available in every corner of the country, so if you traditionally got a snowy picture on your old tube, you might get no picture at all on your HDTV.

The deadline, by the way, for broadcaster to [transition to digital television](#) (DTV) signals has been delayed until June. For more information, go to the Government's [DTV](#) website: dtv2009.gov.



**With a decent antenna,
your HDTV can tune in
local HD channels -- for
free.**

[\(click for image gallery\)](#)

To find out if DTV is available in your area, visit AntennaWeb.org. The site will help you determine which stations near you are broadcasting digital signals and what kind of antenna you'll need to pull them in. Of course, you can always experiment by connecting any TV antenna and running your set's auto-tune feature. If you're lucky, you won't need to mount an outside antenna to enjoy over-the-air digital TV goodness.

Unfortunately, even if you're able to view over-the-air TV, there's no easy way to record it. (Horrors! You'll have to sit through commercials again!) Forget the old VCR: You'd need one of those digital converter boxes to use it, and even then the recordings would look might crummy compared with live TV. And, let's be honest: VCRs don't stack up to DVRs.

Luckily, there are third-party solutions: Chiefly, TiVo. The TiVo HD and HD XL models include OTA tuners, meaning they can record broadcasted shows just like they do cable shows. And because their tuners come in pairs, they can record two shows simultaneously while you're watching a third.

Of course, there's some up-front cost involved: the HD and HD XL cost \$299.99 and \$599.99, respectively, not including monthly fees (which start at \$12.95). It's cheaper than cable, but still on the pricey side.

Then there's the home media center solution. For example, a Windows Vista PC is all you need to [set up a an HD entertainment system](#) complete with DVR. Apple enthusiasts have Apple TV, and on the [open source](#) side of the house are MythTV, Freevo, and Boxee to name a few home theater platforms.

Watch The Web

Price is not a factor if you watch TV on the Web. Sites like Hulu, Fancast, Joost, and the networks' own sites are home to thousands of hours' worth of programming, from current episodes of *Friday Night Lights* and *The Office* to classics like *Hill Street Blues*. (Some of the sites have movies, too.) Even better, it's all on-demand: Just click the show you want, and presto, you're watching within seconds.

What's the catch? No surprise here: You have to sit through the occasional commercial. An hour-long episode of *Chuck*, for example, has five commercial breaks -- just like when it airs on standard TV. When you watch it on Hulu, however, each break includes just one commercial, usually no longer than a 30-second spot. Seems like a fair "price" to pay, no?

Get The Big Picture

Of course, a Web browser on your PC isn't the same thing as a 42-inch plasma in your living room. The experience of watching TV on a computer leaves much to be desired -- namely, a couch, a remote, and a big screen. You can overcome at least some of these obstacles by connecting a PC to your TV (usually via [VGA](#) or HDMI), then adding a [wireless](#) keyboard to the mix. Logitech's diNovo Mini, for instance, is a palm-sized keyboard/mouse combo that operates over Bluetooth.

If you have a PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360, there's another way to bridge the gap between your PC and your TV. MediaMall's PlayOn, a \$39.99 Windows program, streams Amazon Video on Demand, ESPN, Hulu, Netflix, and other Web-based content to the living room via your game console. (Nintendo Wii support is imminent.) And speaking of streaming, the aforementioned TiVo boxes can stream shows from Amazon and Netflix.



Stream Web-based video content into to the living room via your Xbox game console.

[\(click for image gallery\)](#)

How To Connect Your PC To The Big Screen In The Living Room

Start by getting the right cables. You'll need a VGA 15-pin connector cable, OR an S-Video cable AND a mini-to-RCA audio cable, OR a wireless converter box. Then make sure your PC or laptop supports multiple displays.

Using A VGA Cable

1. With the power OFF, connect the 15-pin end of the VGA cable to your PC and the other end to your TV.
2. Once the TV and PC are ON, use your TV remote to change the [input](#) source to "VGA".

Using An S-Video Cable

With the power OFF, connect one end of the S-video cable into your PC or laptop, and the other into your TV. Only the video signal will travel on this path.

1. To move the audio signal, connect the mini end of the RCA video cable into your PC or laptop's audio output. Put the red connector into the TV's right speaker input and the white connector into the left speaker input.
2. With the power ON, use your TV remote to change the input source to "S-Video".

Alternatively, you could use a wireless adapter such as Addlogix's InternetVue 2020 Wireless Display Adapter, or D-Link's High Definition Wireless Media Player. Prices hover in the \$179 - \$250 range.

Options like these may get you back to the couch, but there's still the matter of resolution: While a smattering of shows can be viewed in high-def 720p, most streaming video is of a quality better suited to a laptop than a living room.

What's more, not absolutely everything can be viewed online -- not yet, anyway. AMC shows like *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, for instance, have yet to hit the Interwebs. And sports fans are sure to be disappointed, as live broadcasts really haven't caught on yet. The new ESPN360 service promises a glimmer of hope -- it broadcasts many games and events in real-time--but not all Internet providers support the service (probably because of its inherently heavy bandwidth consumption).



**Say goodbye to cable --
and cables -- with
D-Link's HD Wireless
Media Player.**

[\(click for image gallery\)](#)

TV By Mail

Another way to satisfy your TV cravings is with a subscription to Blockbuster or Netflix. Both services stock an endless supply of shows, all of them delivered on DVD to your mailbox. That's an attractive option if you want to consume a series like *24* or *Lost* in multi-episode chunks, or if you want to watch shows from premium channels like HBO and Showtime (which are mostly unavailable on the Web).

DVDs also afford old-school viewing: Just pop in your disc and hit the couch. The downside, of course, is that you have to wait for current seasons of favorite shows to be released on DVD. If half the fun of watching *24*, *Lost*, and the like is discussing last night's episode around the water cooler, plan on spending more time at your desk.

Still, DVDs offer commercial-free viewing, and if you have a Blu-ray or upscaling DVD player, you'll enjoy near-high-def picture quality. Subscriptions are cheap, too: Blockbuster plans start at \$9.99 per month, while Netflix costs as little as \$8.99. Both services have their pros and cons, but Netflix has one big ace in the hole: free, unlimited video streaming (movies and TV shows alike) to your PC and/or a set-top box.

What kind of box? In addition to the Xbox 360 and TiVo HD/HD XL, Netflix can stream to the \$99 Roku Digital Video Player and a handful of Blu-ray players from LG and Samsung. Alas, not every title in the Netflix library is available for streaming, and the image quality barely exceeds that of standard-definition cable. But there's much to be said for unlimited on-demand content you can peruse right from the couch.

If you're really desperate to excise monthly subscription fees from your life, head to your local library. You may be able to check out TV series on DVD just like you check out books. Granted, the selection won't rival Blockbuster's

or Netflix's, and you may get to keep the discs for only a week at a time. But you sure can't beat the price.

InformationWeek has published an in-depth report on Windows 7. [Download the report here](#) (registration required).

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