

Plugging your TV into the Web

Sorting through the gadget options

If you want to get Web content onto your TV, there are plenty of new options. Here's a sample of what's available this holiday season. Options range in price from \$60 to more than \$1,000. Almost all require broadband service and a fast home network, wired or wireless.

AppleTV



PRICE: \$99

WHAT IT DOES: Wirelessly connects TV to iTunes, Netflix and a few other Web services.

REQUIREMENTS: TV with HDMI, broadband, fast Wi-Fi, PC running iTunes.

PROS AND CONS: A simple, inexpensive way to give a TV wireless access to Web content. It's basically a wireless adapter that connects only to iTunes and a few websites chosen by Apple. It doesn't play full high-def content (720p, not 1080p). It connects to an instant video rental store run by Apple, which has a limited selection so far. Remote control is tiny and has few controls. May be decent option for people with large iTunes video libraries.

GoogleTV



PRICE: \$300-\$1,400

WHAT IT DOES: Adds Google software to TV, including browser and search tool. Wirelessly connects TV to Netflix, YouTube and other Web services. Sold as \$300 set-top box from Logitech, \$400 Sony Blu-ray player and Sony TVs that cost up to \$1,400.

REQUIREMENTS: TV with HDMI, broadband, fast Wi-Fi. Some features require cable TV service.

PROS AND CONS: Basically a small computer running Google's mobile operating system. It connects to Web services through apps. The hardware is nice, but the software has rough spots. Not the best option for "cord cutters" because key features require a cable box. TV networks have hobbled value as Web connector by blocking access to free shows online.

Vizio



PRICE: \$300-\$2,400

WHAT IT DOES: Vizio is among TV makers offering sets that wirelessly connect to Web services, including Netflix and Amazon.com. Vizio sets with "Internet Apps" cost about \$150 extra.

REQUIREMENTS: Broadband, fast Wi-Fi.

PROS AND CONS: A big button on remote calls up menu of apps, so you can stream or rent online video directly from the set. Remotes have slide-out keyboards. Software not as polished as some external devices, but more convenient. Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Sony also offer "app TVs" that connect via Wi-Fi or Ethernet.

Xbox 360



PRICE: \$200-\$400

WHAT IT DOES: Game console plays DVD movies, streams video from Netflix, ESPN3 and Zune service. Streams TV content from home network. Also plays games.

REQUIREMENTS: Broadband, fast Wi-Fi.

PROS AND CONS: Game consoles are morphing into Web video hubs. Xbox streams video from Netflix, Zune video store and Media Center PCs. ESPN3 streams to Xbox if you have \$60 per year Xbox Live plan and digital TV or broadband. Kinect accessory enables voice control of media player. Sony PlayStation 3 streams Netflix and Web video; Nintendo Wii streams Netflix in lower definition.

Sony



PRICE: \$130 for Network Media Player

WHAT IT DOES: Book-sized adapter connects most any TV to Web apps such as Netflix, Hulu Plus, YouTube and Pandora. Streams content from PCs on home network.

REQUIREMENTS: Broadband, fast Wi-Fi or Ethernet. Works with or without HDMI.

PROS AND CONS: Sony is building Wi-Fi and Web apps into many new products. For existing TVs it offers this well-designed box with premium, classic remote control. Software not as polished as AppleTV. Doesn't require an HDMI connection on the TV or iTunes to stream content from a PC.

Roku



PRICE: \$60-\$100

WHAT IT DOES: Simple wireless adapter that connects TVs to Netflix, Amazon.com, MLB.TV, other Web services.

REQUIREMENTS: Broadband, fast Wi-Fi or Ethernet. Works with or without HDMI.

PROS AND CONS: One of the simplest options for streaming Netflix and other services to a TV. Easy to set up and operate. Doesn't require HDMI connections. The \$60 model plays 720p video and has 802.11g Wi-Fi. The \$80 and \$100 models play 1080p and have faster 802.11n. No browser available yet. Roku touts quantity of apps, but many are obscure and have limited appeal.

Cable box



PRICE: \$72-\$264 per year

WHAT IT DOES: Plays cable TV content, on-demand video. Some models also function as digital video recorders.

REQUIREMENTS: Cable TV service.

PROS AND CONS: For millions, it's the default option for connecting TVs to digital content. Easy to install — cable company does it. On-demand video stores are convenient. But the boxes can be expensive to rent and require cable plans. The boxes are big, often have poor software and don't allow browsing or access to online video services. TiVo and Moxi offer boxes with similar features with better software and access to online video.

Media Center PC



PRICE: \$400-\$1,500

WHAT IT DOES: Connects to all Web video services. With a TV tuner, works as DVR, recording and playing back broadcast and cable TV.

REQUIREMENTS: Broadband to stream Web video. Tuner to record TV. Special tuner or adapter required to record digital cable.

PROS AND CONS: The most capable — and potentially most complicated — option. A Windows Media Center PC has great interface, including customizable schedule grid that blends Web and broadcast offerings; stores tons of content; and often comes with HDMI output. Can be tricky and expensive to get a PC that works with digital cable. PCs must be updated and managed. Sizes range from tiny boxes that hang behind TV to traditional desktop.

Intel WiDi



PRICE: Transmitter in higher-end laptops that cost \$600 or more. Receiver costs \$100.

WHAT IT DOES: Built into recent laptops with upper-end processors. A \$100 adapter is connected to the TV. Then whatever is displayed on the laptop is simultaneously shown on TV. WiDi short for wireless display.

REQUIREMENTS: Certain Intel Core i3, i5 or i7 processors in laptop. Netgear Push2TV receiver. Broadband to stream video.

PROS AND CONS: Works well once you've figured it out. Hardest part is making sure laptop has proper hardware inside and finding Netgear adapter. Laptop display may include borders and frames you don't want on the big screen. Can't do anything else with the computer while watching a show.

Boxee



PRICE: \$199

WHAT IT DOES: PC-like system for playing Web video and locally stored content. Includes browser. Boxee apps connect directly to Web services such as Flickr and Pandora and to pay TV services such as Netflix, Vudu and MLB.TV.

REQUIREMENTS: Broadband (at least 4.5 Mbps for 1080p video), fast Wi-Fi or Ethernet, TV with HDMI input.

PROS AND CONS: An open-source version of Windows Media Center. Get it on a softball-sized Boxee box — basically a mini PC — or install free software on PC. Lists TV shows that are available free online and lets you choose site to stream from. Techie vibe — including community help forums and sharing tools — may appeal to geeks but intimidate technophobes.