Some TVs Go Directly Online for Streaming Movies

By JOHN R. QUAIN

For more than a decade, tech and media companies have wrestled with how to deliver digitized movies directly over the Internet to consumers: how do you get the copy-protected files from the computer to the big screen in the living room?

The early answers didn’t inspire many couch potatoes to get off the sofa. You could either plug a laptop computer into your TV set (assuming the computer and the television had the right connections) or buy a box, called a media extender, for your home theater that received streaming files from your computer. Media extenders proved obstreperous and confusing: some files wouldn’t play on some extenders, the boxes were awkward to set up and movie downloads were painfully slow.

Since then, faster broadband speeds have become more common and companies have figured out how to stream videos that start in seconds, inspiring consumer electronics companies to put Internet connections into TVs, Blu-ray disc players and other devices to tap into online-movie services from the likes of Netflix and Blockbuster. It’s an end run around the limited video-on-demand offerings from cable companies and eliminates the need for a separate black box.

“This is huge,” says Dan Schinasi, a marketing manager at Samsung Electronics America. “This is what we have been waiting for.” Samsung is doubtless enthusiastic, introducing Internet connectivity on 23 different TVs, starting at $1,600 for a 40-inch LCD model and three Blu-ray players priced from $200 to $350. Indeed, the trend is that such Internet connections will rapidly become standard. According to research analysts at NPD, 12 percent of flat-panel sets sold in September in the United States had networking capabilities, up from less than 1 percent a year ago. There are now Internet-ready models from LG, Mitsubishi, Panasonic, Sharp, Sony and Vizio.

The Samsung TVs, for example, access online movie services like Amazon Video On Demand or Blockbuster On Demand using Yahoo’s widgets, small icons that appear on the bottom of the screen and which also include popular Web services like Flickr, eBay and YouTube.

Blockbuster’s service offers movie rentals from $2.99 to $3.99, with purchases costing $7.99 to $19.99. At the moment, Blockbuster’s titles can appear in wide screen, but only in standard definition, rather than high definition. It took about 25 seconds to start up the Blockbuster service, which offered new titles like the Jack Black movie “Year One” for purchase at $19.99 and “Unmistaken Child” to rent at $3.99. When you choose a movie, the software does a quick check of your set’s connection speed and then starts playing your selection in under 10 seconds (easily beating cable video-on-demand from Time Warner in my tests). And while the cineaste in me wanted to shun anything less than HD, the standard-definition version of “Watchmen” was just fine, with instant gratification easily trumping any qualms I had about less-than-
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Amazon Video On Demand was comparable, although it appeared to have a larger library of choices. The company claims to have more than 50,000 titles, with at least 2,000 of those in high definition. “Away We Go” was available to rent in HD for $4.99 (a standard-definition rental was $3.99). HD rentals were sharper and crisper to my eye, although a free stream of an episode of “30 Rock” in HD looked softer than the original live HD broadcast.

Other sets also offer Yahoo widgets and streaming movies from the Web. Sony offers the Yahoo feature on some sets and plans to offer Netflix streaming movies by the end of the year. LG Electronics has models that include Yahoo widgets and already include the online-movie services Vudu and Netflix. The former has the largest offering of HD movies to rent or own online and comes the closest in terms of picture quality and sound to true HD (1080p for the techie crowd). Rentals in Vudu’s HDX format have sharper picture details and better sound than other offerings, although I still find the downloads and streaming versions a little darker (and thus less crisp) than HD broadcasts.

Known primarily for its by-mail movie subscription business, Netflix has become a digital movie juggernaut by streaming movies to subscribers free of charge. The same $8.99 a month you pay for a by-mail subscription entitles you to watch as many of the company’s 17,000 digitized titles as you want, as often as you want, whenever you want. Its HD offerings lack the visual clarity of Vudu’s, but Netflix is a better value and is available on many different devices in the living room — the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 consoles, a stand-alone box from Roku, and TiVo machines. So if the Netflix option appeals to you, you don’t have to buy a new TV or Blu-ray player to get it.

But choice also means confusion: not all services are available on all devices. On some of its flat panels, Panasonic offers its own Internet services, which includes Amazon Video On Demand, but not Netflix or Blockbuster or Vudu. Samsung offers Blockbuster on its sets, but not Netflix. LG offers Netflix on its sets, but not Blockbuster. And even when they do offer the same branded service, not all the devices necessarily give you the same features.

Netflix subscribers who use the streaming option on the XBox 360, for example, will find they can add movies to their queue from the TV screen (and they have to pay $50 a year for Microsoft’s Xbox Live Gold membership to do so). But if you want to change your streaming movie lineup on the LG or Sony sets, you’ll have to go back to your computer.

Buyers will also find that some sets, like those from Panasonic, Samsung and Sony, require a wired Ethernet connection for Web access. (Vizio’s Internet-ready sets, due out this month, will have built-in Wi-Fi.) Samsung dealers offer an optional Wi-Fi adapter (802.11n) for just $80, and there are high-speed adapters that just plug into an electrical outlet. I connected a set using Belkin’s 200 Mbps $100 Powerline AV Starter Kit without entering any codes or doing anything other than plugging the adapters in.

But we’re still a long way from being able to order any movie we want to watch whenever we want to watch it. Film studios are loath to release what they perceive will be blockbuster DVDs for digital distribution, for example, until months after release, and there are many more held back by copyright issues and concerns about piracy. And even the movies you can rent digitally from Blockbuster or Amazon are often subject to
the dreaded 24-hour window, which means if you don't finish watching on the same day you started viewing it, you'll have to pay an additional charge.

Still, the option of streaming a movie from anywhere — Netflix, Amazon or whoever — is a major leap forward. It frees viewers from the yoke of the one-store-only approach taken by cable companies and products like Apple TV. Ultimately, it's a liberating experience — if you think of never having to get off the couch again to pick a movie as liberating.