

DISNEY, APPLE, NETFLIX: STREAMING EUPHORIA IS UPON US, BUT COMES WITH PROS AND CONS

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TORONTO — Choosing how to spend your time in front of the television has never been so difficult, and the decision isn't about to get any easier.

On Friday, Apple TV Plus becomes the latest player to dive into the already crowded selection of streaming services, offering up a buffet of original programming it hopes will spark buzz and attract eyeballs away from major competitors Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Crave in Canada.

Disney Plus throws its hat into the game on Nov. 12 with an extensive menu of family-friendly entertainment.

It's enough to make a couch potato cry tears of joy over the endless amount of "must-see" programming at their fingertips, and provoke feelings of anxiety in casual viewers left wondering how many streaming services they really need.

"There's a danger that Hollywood is simply making too much television. It is a lot for people to handle," says Joe Adalian, West Coast editor for U.S. culture news outlet Vulture.

"The problem is that people don't have time to catch up with all of this stuff."

The streaming wars offer several advantages for the average Canadian household, but industry watchers say not everything is perfect. Here's a look at the upsides and downsides of the so-called streaming revolution and some tips on how to come out winning.

UPSIDE: FREE TRIALS

Viewers willing to strategize could potentially coast along on free-trial memberships for a good part of the next year, suggests Convergence Research president Brahm Eiley. With so many different streaming TV platforms jockeying for attention, he says several of them will likely juice up their introductory offers. Most major streaming companies offer 30-day trials, while Crave and some of the smaller names, such as horror service Shudder and British TV hubs AcornTV and BritBox, have shorter trials of seven days (which can sometimes be extended with coupon codes floating around online). Eiley recommends dipping into the services you're curious about and ducking out before you start to pay for ones you don't like. "There's no penalty at the end of the day, there's no contract," he says. "It's very easy."

UPSIDE: STEADY PRICES

While Netflix has raised its monthly subscription fee several times over the past five years, saying the money was going towards making original programs, Eiley doesn't see another hike in the near future. "Although we expect Netflix to be dominant for a long time, we believe it will not be able to raise prices as frequently as it has," he notes. "This will be good for the consumer at least in the short term." Other streaming platforms could also hold steady, mostly because the newest entrants are aggressively undercutting their biggest competitors. Disney Plus will cost \$8.99 per month while Apple TV Plus is even cheaper at \$5.99 per month. Apple's limited selection of programming also comes free for one year to anyone who's bought a new iPhone, iPad, Apple TV, iPod Touch or Mac since Sept. 10.

MIXED: STARTING TO LOOK LIKE CABLE

Despite the seemingly reasonable monthly prices of most streaming options, the total can add up fast depending on the size of your household. A family that subscribes to only the biggest three companies — Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Crave/HBO — will pay upwards of \$40 per month. And that's not factoring in sports fans who will pay at least another \$20 per month each for DAZN, Sportsnet Now and other comparable services. "Your average cable bill is about \$70 so if you put it in relative comparison, (streaming) services are a steal," says Kaan Yigit, a technology analyst at Solutions Research Group. "But if you have diverse tastes and want to have access to different types of content —or your household is large — it ends up being relatively expensive." For most people counting their pennies, streaming is still cheaper if you don't go overboard with the options, and that's an upside.

DOWNSIDE: CONTENT DELUGE

Having the freedom to watch TV whenever and wherever you want is nice, but the risk of getting lost in the overwhelming number of hyped shows and movies is becoming a real challenge for many. Sometimes that can mean paying for subscriptions you don't actually use — or forgot you had. "Cable was a lot simpler, you just paid for it, you knew your bill, but you often got hosed," says Adalian of Vulture. "There's a way that you can craft a bill that's going to be a little less expensive. It just depends how much effort you want to put into your TV watching." For Canadians, stripping back the number of subscription services isn't always easy, because it's not always clear who owns the domestic rights to each new TV show. For example, U.S. streaming platform Hulu doesn't operate in Canada, so it splits the rights for its programs between various Canadian outlets, which include CBC Gem, Crave and traditional broadcasters. CBS All Access produces original shows for its streaming platform, but in Canada much of the service's classic TV library isn't available. Confused yet? It'll only become more complex when Peacock, a new platform from American network NBC, launches at an undetermined date.

DOWNSIDE: TRADITIONAL TV ISN'T DEAD

With all of this talk about a TV revolution, it's important to remember that cable and satellite television is still very prominent. A fall 2018 survey by Media Technology Monitor, a research organization operated by CBC/Radio-Canada, found 71 per cent of Canadian households were paying for traditional TV services, even if they used streaming platforms on top of it. The value of live TV becomes especially clear during awards season when social media is alight with commentary about events such as the Academy Awards. Canada's traditional broadcasters usually stream those shows online, but they require viewers to log onto the feed using their cable or satellite account — leaving many viewers to seek a friend who still pays for cable. And in many ways, streaming technology itself isn't flawless, as some online viewers learned earlier this year when the Toronto Raptors won the NBA championship in almost real time on broadcast television, and about 30 seconds later when the lag of streaming platforms caught up with the rest of the world.