

# Best free TV streaming services: HBO, Roku, Sling TV, Pluto TV, Tubi TV and more

Netflix is the best streaming service, period, but it starts at \$8.99 a month. Hulu is arguably the best streaming-TV bargain but even it costs \$5.99 every month.

In the uncertain financial times of the coronavirus pandemic, you may be looking to cut your streaming costs to, well, free. The good news? As long as you've got internet, you can enjoy a wealth of free TV. And in response to boom in streaming caused by stay-at-home orders, numerous services like HBO, the Roku Channel and Sling TV have rolled out new freebies and free trials in recent days.



While there are plenty of free services, some of them come with limitations. First and foremost, **many of these services are ad-supported**, so you won't be able to skip commercials (HBO is a notable exception). Most have older shows and movies, sort of like basic cable reruns. And some network sites won't let you stream all their shows unless you're a paid cable or satellite subscriber -- but many offer a selection of stuff you can watch without signing in or paying. Let's take a look at some the best free, *legal* ways to indulge your inner couch potato. (Prefer movies? Check out these 10 free Netflix alternatives.) Note that Showtime, Pluto TV and CBS News, all mentioned below, are owned by CNET's parent company ViacomCBS.

## HBO

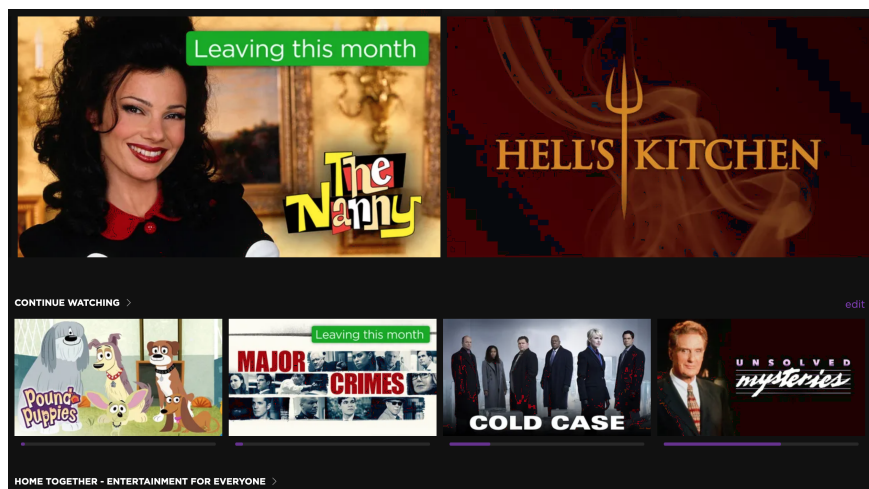
During April, HBO is making a bunch of its best known series and documentaries, as well as 20 Warner Bros. movies, free for anyone to watch without a subscription. Unlike most of the services here, HBO's shows and

movies are presented without commercials.

**What you can watch:** Don't get too excited. You'll still need an HBO subscription to watch *Westworld*, *Watchmen* or *Chernobyl*. But there's still more than 500 hours of stuff included in the freebie, including all seven seasons of *The Sopranos* and *Veep*, as well as five seasons of *Ballers* and two of *Barry*. There's also documentaries like *McMillion\$* and *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley*, and films such as *Detective Pikachu* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. Here's the full list.

**Where you can watch:** If you don't have it already you'll need to download and install the free HBO Now or HBO Go app. It's available on media streamers and smart TVs from Roku, Amazon Fire TV, Apple TV, Samsung, Vizio and LG, among others, as well as Apple and Android phones and tablets.

## Roku Channel



Roku Channel is designed for people who own the company's streaming products, but anyone with a phone or PC browser and a connection to the internet can use it. And now as part of its Home Together initiative, the service is offering free access to 20-plus premium channels for 30 days. The free channels include Showtime, Epix, Smithsonian, Acorn TV and Hallmark.

**What you can watch:** The selection of TV shows is heavy on reality TV, such as *Hoarders* and *Hell's Kitchen*, and crime shows such as *Cold Case*, but also includes five seasons of feel-good pick *Schitt's Creek*. Unfortunately, not every series is complete and the service only offers a single episode in some cases. There's plenty of stuff to watch, however, including a dedicated kids section and another for live news. There's also a solid array of past older movies including *Stand By Me*, *The Karate Kid* and *Donnie Darko*. Beyond the 30-day freebie above you can subscribe to premium services including HBO, much like you can on Amazon Prime Video channels or the Apple TV app.

**Where you can watch:** As you might expect, you can get the Roku Channel on Roku devices including streamers and Roku TVs. However, you can also watch the Roku Channel in any browser or via the iOS or Android Roku apps, though it doesn't offer the option to download shows for offline viewing. There's also a Roku Channel app on Samsung Smart TVs.



## IMDb TV

Launched early last year as FreeDive and given a new name and an infusion of content in July, this free service bears the venerable branding of the Internet Movie Database, a motherlode of movie lore that's been an Amazon subsidiary since 1998. Amazon happens to be Roku's biggest competitor in streaming hardware with its Fire TV devices, and perhaps for that reason you'll need a Fire TV -- or a computer hooked up to a TV -- to watch IMDb TV on an actual TV.

**What you can watch:** As you might expect, the service focuses primarily on films, for example Paddington, Spider-Man (the 2002 version) and Elf, but it also has a solid selection of TV series. The selection is similar to Roku's, including Schitt's Creek (which is also available on Netflix commercial-free). Other titles include A&E's Cold Case Files, History's The Hunt for the Zodiac Killer and nine seasons of the Gen X classic Little House on the Prairie, starring Michael Landon.

**Where you can watch:** Any PC or Mac browser or any Amazon Prime Video app on a phone or tablet can stream IMDb TV, but the only actual TV devices that get access are Fire TV streamers and smart TVs that run the Fire TV Edition software. You'll also need an account, although it works seamlessly with any Amazon account.

## Sling TV Free

Recently redubbed Stay in and Sling, the free version of Sling TV includes free on-demand TV, movies and live TV from ABC News Live and (for the next month at least) Fox News as well as local Fox stations in select markets.

**What you can watch:** Sling TV's rebrand of its existing free streaming service includes streams of ABC News Live and Fox News as well as "thousands of movies and shows suitable for kids and families," including titles such as Teen Titans Go!, DC Super Hero Girls and Lego Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu.

Meanwhile, the paid version of Sling TV is one of CNET's favorite live TV streaming services at \$30 a month and offers dozens of channels including Cartoon Network, Comedy Central and CNN. As an added bonus, Sling

TV's seven day trial no longer requires a credit card.

**Where you can watch:** Sling TV Free is supported by the same devices that Sling is -- they use the same app -- and the list is extensive: from streamers to consoles to mobile devices.

## Crackle

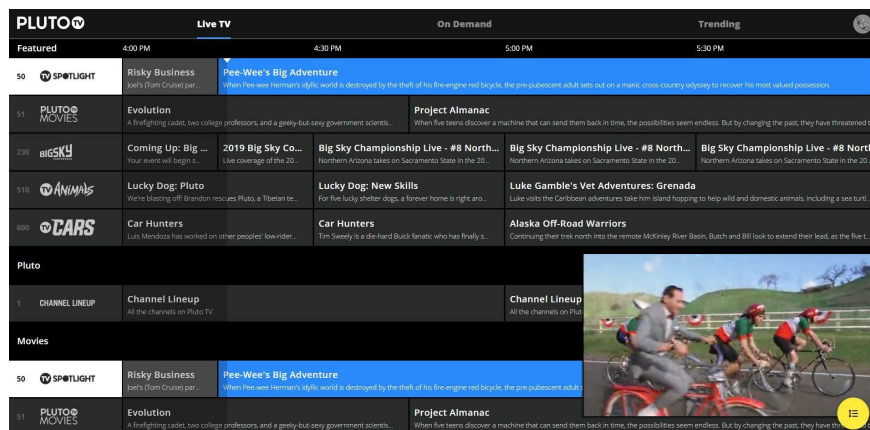
Sony's Crackle is an ad-supported streaming service that offers mostly movies, but also some TV shows -- including original content. It's available on a wide variety of devices and doesn't even require you to set up an account, though doing so enables you to save favorites, get recommendations and resume playback if you switch between devices.

**What you can watch:** Crackle's commercial-supported selection isn't particularly extensive, with only a little over 100 different shows, and mainly consists of family sitcoms such as All in the Family, Roseanne and Who's the Boss. As above, not every series is complete. In some cases you might get only one or two seasons, or even just a partial season.

**Where you can watch:** Crackle's list of devices covers most platforms. The service offers apps for all mobile platforms, game consoles and major streaming devices. It's even baked into many smart TVs. It does not offer the option to download shows for offline viewing.

## Pluto TV

Pluto TV is noteworthy for offering not only on-demand movies, but also live TV channels including CBS News and, ahem, CNET. It's ad-supported, of course, but definitely one of the best free-content options currently available.

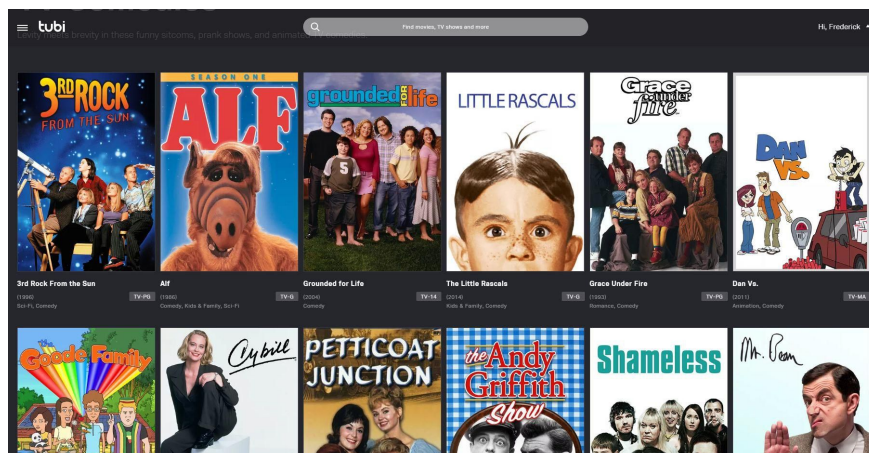


**What you can watch:** Pluto offers an impressive selection of live channels, all of them sorted into categories like news, sports, comedy and movies in a grid format. On-demand TV content consists mostly of crime and reality shows, and it's not organized nearly as well as the live channels. One oddity: If you're watching a live stream, there's no way to pause. You can only mute it.

**Where you can watch:** Pluto TV works in desktop browsers, but also offers a Windows client. It has apps for Android, iOS and various smart TVs and channels for Apple TV (\$179 at Apple), Fire TV and Roku.

# Tubi TV

The name belies the content: Tubi TV offers considerably more movies than it does TV shows, but that's not to say you shouldn't check out its extensive library. Similar to Crackle, this ad-supported network is available on a wide variety of devices and doesn't require an account, though signing up for one enables you to save favorites and resume playback if you switch between devices.

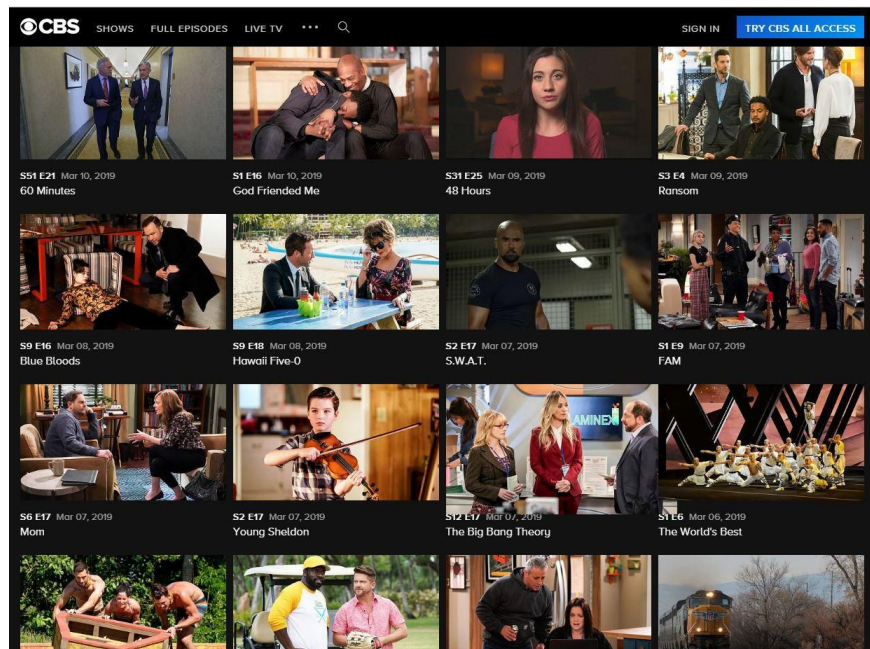


**What you can watch:** Tubi TV definitely isn't Hulu. Its TV selection consists of a lot of British imports and various shows you've probably never heard of. Indeed, there's not even a dedicated TV section, just a few TV-specific categories (comedies, dramas, reality and so on) within its much larger content list.

**Where you can watch:** Tubi TV's list of devices rivals that of Crackle. The service offers apps for Android and iOS, the major game consoles and streaming devices, and some Samsung TVs. It doesn't offer the option to download content for offline viewing.

## Network sites: ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC and PBS

Just about every major network lets you stream shows via a web site or mobile app, which seems like great news for cord cutters. So what if you couldn't watch, say, the latest episode of Bob's Burgers? Just fire up the Fox Now app and stream it on demand. At least, that's the idea.



**What you can watch:** If there's a show that's currently on the air, chances are good you can watch it online at a network site. However, in some cases there's a Catch-22: Many networks require you to have an active service provider (like cable or satellite). Unless you can supply valid sign-in credentials, you can't stream. That's true of networks such as AMC and Syfy, meaning no episodes of *The Walking Dead* or *Deadly Class* for you. But CBS, TBS, The CW and a few others will let you watch at least some episodes of some shows without a sign-in. So you'll have to poke around a bit.

**Where you can watch:** This also varies from one network to another, but in most cases you can watch shows in a browser, on a mobile device or via a media-streamer app. But download options are few and far between, so don't expect to be watching shows offline unless you pay for them. Here's the list of major network sites.

1. ABC
2. CBS
3. Fox
4. NBC
5. PBS

## Hoopla Digital

Got a library card? Check to see if your library has partnered with Hoopla. This digital-media service allows you to check out all kinds of stuff -- from ebooks to movies to TV shows. When you "borrow" one, you have 72 hours in which to watch it. Your library determines the total number of titles you can borrow each month.

**What you can watch:** Hoopla's TV selection is something of a hodgepodge, with a smattering of well-known shows mixed in with a lot of self-help, documentary and family fare. For example, you'll find three seasons of the SyFy original *Humans*, both seasons of *The Jim Gaffigan Show* and lots of Ken Burns documentaries. Hoopla also has instructional videos from *The Great Courses* series, various PBS Kids shows and plenty of Acorn TV content that would otherwise require a subscription.

**Where you can watch:** Hoopla content can be viewed just about anywhere: mobile devices, streaming devices and on your PC in a browser. Surprisingly, the mobile apps offer not only streaming, but also a download option for offline viewing.

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