

The future of TV is here, and it's on the internet

BY GILLIAN SHAW, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JULY 27, 2009



The TouchSmart All-in-One computer system by Hewlett-Packard, the world's biggest computer maker, during a presentation in Berlin, June 10, 2008. The TouchSmart All-in-One allows users to work with photos, music, video, the Internet and television by tapping or swiping the screen

Photograph by: Tobias Schwarz, Reuters

We've come a long way since the days when you had to study the manual for a week to figure out how to tape your favourite TV show.

Today, time-shifting, watching TV on the web and other digital tricks make it possible to catch up on Oprah after work or to save an entire season of Lost to take along to the summer cottage.

In the latest episode of TV 2.0, the U. S. cable giant Comcast has announced a service offering TV shows online to its customers --a move aimed at forestalling a shift of paying customers to free online offerings.

While watching TV shows online is still a legal quagmire, there are websites offering up ways to watch TV for free and some Canadians are bypassing measures aimed at blocking their access to those sites.

Vancouver's Rich Patterson and his wife Shannon opted for the more conventional route, signing up for Telus digital television and getting a personal video recorder (PVR) to record TV shows.

"Our family is a bit slow when it comes to the whole digital TV," Rich Patterson said. "This was a real eye-opener as to what is available."

Shawn Hall, spokesman for Telus, said his company recently passed the 100,000-customer mark for its

emerging digital television service. The company added satellite TV service in late June.

It's indicative of the growing pains as traditional cable providers square off against new contenders like Telus' digital TV and all face challenges from the web.

"Consumers are taking control in various ways," according to PricewaterhouseCoopers' Global Entertainment & Media Outlook 2009-2013. "They are adopting 'time-shifting,' using digital video recorders and video-on-demand to free them up from the TV schedule, enabling them to watch what they want when they want."

Canada's video-on-demand subscription market is projected to increase at a 14.9% CAGR (compound annual growth rate) from US\$110-million in 2009 to US\$214-million in 2013.

Jerry Brown, director of PwC's advisory services, said television is going face challenges just as conventional music models have been challenged by the digital shift.

"One of the interesting phenomenon is what happens when different media formats start bumping into the IP [Internet Protocol] world," he said. "We are seeing TV starting to bump into the IP world."

"In the U. S. you now have Hulu, a video-on-demand distribution website. That kind of technology is absolutely going to come into Canada in some way."

"It is going to be a challenge in the way music models were challenged."

Hulu, co-owned by NBC Universal, News Corp. and Providence Equity Partners, is an online video service that offers TV shows, movies and clips at Hulu.com and other sites, free for users in the United States. It is blocked to users outside the U. S., but some web surfers access it to watch their favourite shows online by hiding their location with software that makes it appear as if they are in the U. S.

Ron Phillips, an American travel blogger and tour guide who has lived in Rome for two years, gets to tune in American shows and sports from his home just as if he had never left the United States.

He uses a Slingbox to tune into American television using an Internet connection.

"I have a Slingbox, which is a cool thing so we watch American TV over here," he said in a phone interview. "I can watch college football games, golf -- you can change channels and I have a program to record so I can save a program on my computer and watch it the next day."

The Slingbox, which comes in several different models, lets viewers watch shows from their home television from any location using a computer, personal digital assistant or a smartphone. The Slingbox is available in Canada with the entry level model starting at about \$235.

Most recently Sling Media released a wireless-network-only version of its SlingPlayer Mobile application that lets viewers watch shows and control their home TV from an iPhone or iPod touch.

Phillips has his Slingbox hooked up in his son's home in Atlanta, Ga., with the television service delivered via a satellite provider. He can change channels just as if he was in his son's living room in front of the TV.

He watches U. S. television on his computer or through a hookup to his television.

"I had friends over for the [U. S. presidential] inauguration," he said. "We had 15 people here -- no one else can get live TV except the embassy or armed forces."

Phillips said the online connection makes a huge difference to living in Italy.

"We are not allowed to watch programs from America because we are outside American broadcast rights," said Phillips. "We could not survive without the Internet over here."

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