Beyond Netflix and Spotify, what subscriptions are worth keeping in quarantine?

Enlarge / Would not recommend this keyboard setup given our impulse control.

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Two seismic forces combined in the spring of 2020 and caused us all to reevaluate our choices: the COVID-19 pandemic… and the last decade's slow, inevitable march toward the disappearance of ownership. We no longer own records; we subscribe to Spotify or Apple Music. We don't purchase DVDs; we pay Netflix, Disney, or Amazon a monthly fee and save some shelf space. Google Stadia would like you to stream games in exchange for a recurring payment. Apple will let you take the same approach to your phone, and it's not hard to imagine a future where you skip having a car in the garage and instead pay regularly for access to an autonomous chariot that only shows up when you need it. (We can all agree to blame Adobe, which shifted from Creative Suite to Creative Cloud seven years ago this month.)

While there's never a bad time to assess your monthly subscriptions and trim the fat (read: that magazine your parents once gifted you but… *wait, I pay how much annually for Sports Illustrated now?!*), entering the third month of sheltering at home feels like an apt moment to potentially

save a few bucks. At the same time, comfort of any kind now comes at a premium, and maybe watching your dog rip into a Bark Box will genuinely make you feel better.

There's a service for almost everything these days (like martial arts films? Try Hi-Yah!), and some feel almost mandatory (a TV/film service like Netflix or Disney+, music streaming from Spotify or Apple). So beyond the obvious, what services remain worth clinging to at the moment?

[embedded content]
Can we interest you in David Attenborough talking about ants? What about light? Maybe the ocean, instead?

Docs for the curious streamer

I'm a big ol' documentary nerd—so although in theory I subscribe to CuriosityStream ($12/year introductory offer) for the kids, and they do watch it pretty frequently, I'm the biggest consumer in the house by far. The quality of the documentaries varies, but there are tons of them, and these films rotate through the service on a regular basis.

On the top end, you'll get plenty of nature documentaries voiced over by Sir David Attenborough and their equivalents in space, science, and history. You'll also get stuff produced by outfits you never heard of, featuring interviews with academics who clearly have no idea what to do with a camera pointed at them. (Even these titles have a charm of their own.) On the bottom end, there are some heavy-on-the-animation shorts that aren't all that great—but they're the exceptions, not the rule.

If you're into British television—particularly older British television—Acorn (~$6/month) is also a good niche buy. My parents watch far more of Acorn than I do, but they absolutely swear by it.
—Jim Salter, Technology Reporter

Enlarge / Here’s Vagabon at SXSW in simpler times (2017… though she does have a new Sirius XMU session episode available on demand).
Nathan Mattise

The subscription sound

Ever since my last few years of undergrad, live music has been a staple of my life. I’d travel from Syracuse to every neighboring campus with decent concert bookers and make the trek to New York City a few times a year. And from there, I ended up living (and regularly reviewing concerts) in San Francisco, New Orleans, and Austin. I’ve probably averaged at least one concert a month since 2007, if not a little more. So when SXSW was canceled, losing the chance to see six, seven, eight different bands a day stung.

All of the subscriptions that have been keeping me sane ever since then do it sonically. Music discovery in 2020 remains a hellish experience—a lot of music presses have been slashed or shuttered, music blogs have sputtered, and most digital

services seem happy to rely on algorithms that surface more of what you already know and do so in puzzling ways (what do Hurray for the Riff Raff and Angel Olsen have in common, Spotify? Just that they're acts with women singers?). So although radio isn't perfect in a post-WOXY world, I find Sirius XM ($8.25/month for the first year) offers enough variety and enough of a human touch to keep pace with my curiosity. Its app can be a bit frustrating—why can I only get the last two episodes of Carles' short-form audio think pieces on Hipster Runoff Blog Radio?—but if I'm not driving much these days, it's nice to get that same thoughtfully curated mix on demand at home, too.

To that end, I'd also shout out a "subscription" (or membership, donation, whatever) to local radio. New Orleans' community radio station, WWOZ, just dug into its archives to put together two weeks of past Jazz Fest performances, including rare and historic sets like Ella Fitzgerald dueting with Stevie Wonder in 1977 or Bruce Springsteen at the first fest post-Katrina. And in Austin, contributing to KUTX comes with the added benefit of supporting the NPR affiliate's news arm, KUT. Because if I'm stuck home with no SXSW, I'd like to stay on top of how this virus plays out in my neighborhood.
—Nathan Mattise, Features Editor

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