HBO Max is the streaming service for me



In the last year, the number of streaming platforms has really gotten out of hand. There's Hulu, Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Disney Plus, Apple TV Plus, CBS All Access (soon to be Paramount Plus), and Peacock – and each of them has different pricing tiers. If you scored free trials for Disney Plus and Apple TV Plus, like I did, you probably got to sample a healthy selection of them. Those trials, however, are starting to wind down. Which means it's time to figure out what's worth keeping and what's worth ditching: with this many monthly bills, you should absolutely play favorites. I was surprised to learn mine was HBO Max.

HBO Max isn't particularly well-defined. (It's HBO… and more?) It has baffling holes in its catalog thanks to licensing agreements, which made its original pitch of being a home for various "hubs" – like the DC Universe or Adult Swim – a little shaky. And it has a weird proclivity for making its buzziest originals *reunion specials*, like the recently added *The West Wing* live read and the forthcoming *Friends* reunion. It also

has a ton of films: you can go from Hammer horror to Studio Ghibli to *Yojimbo* to *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and back to *13 Going On 30*, all in the same day.

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In the lead-up to HBO Max's launch, there was some hand wringing about HBO Max's lack of a brand identity, largely stemming from the fact that HBO, as a premium network, has an uncommonly strong one. HBO is home to prestige television that wins Emmys by the armful and drives conversation, and it's the rare network that makes shows that feel like they couldn't exist anywhere else.

Streaming services, however, are *not* networks. They need content, and a lot of it. It means that HBO Max's programming necessarily can't be as carefully considered as HBO's slate is. The concern, per behind-the-scenes reports, was that HBO Max would dilute the brand.

I can slide right into Chernobyl

The thing is: a diluted HBO is *exactly what I wanted*. I adore watching shows like *Deadwood* or *The Leftovers*, but the expectations set by prestige TV also encourage me to make myself a prestigious viewer: prestige means pouring myself a scotch and wearing a smoking jacket as I dim the lights for some Serious Television. Trouble is, I don't always feel like doing that! Sometimes, I just want to watch TV. And HBO Max does away with its sister network's pretension. I can watch the animated series *Primal*, *finally* binge *The O.C.* for the first time, or, yes, even watch *Friends*. And then if I'm feeling more erudite, I can slide right into *Chernobyl*.

The days of streaming as a cheaper alternative to cable are pretty much over. Streaming services have now effectively recreated the same tiered bundles of programming that cable packages previously offered, with the bills to match. But there *is* a flexibility to streaming that still makes it

preferable, one that lets you hop from subscription to subscription, canceling and enrolling on a whim as you peruse one library until you’re tired of it and then move to the next. It’s important, then, to constantly re-appraise what you’re subscribed to and make sure it’s earning its keep. And right now? Few streaming platforms earn their $15 like HBO Max does for me — for now.

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