

Chromecast, Apple TV, or Roku?

By Dawn Swain April 9, 2014

It's all the rage, these neat little attachments to your television. The Chromecast, Apple TV, and Roku have been making the rounds on all kinds of news of late, but what are the real differences between them, and what do they really do?

These nifty little machines are **media streaming devices**. That means that they use your existing internet connection to stream media to your television. There are thousands of different online media channels that these devices can pick up, giving you hours upon hours of viewing pleasure.

But which one is right for you?

Chromecast

Most people will be looking the longest and hardest at Google's Chromecast as their first choice for a media streaming device. It's by far the least expensive, checking in at around \$35, and it has the least amount of hardware. It does require a relatively modern television with HDMI capabilities, and it also requires a *wireless* internet connection – there are no Ethernet options.

The setup is amazingly easy, and any smart device can act as your controller. Your Android tablet or phone, your iPad or iPhone, or your computer – or all of the above! – can run the Chromecast app and allow you to access any of the channels it serves.

One of the few downsides is that while the Chromecast does have access to Netflix and HuluPlus (both of which require separate paid subscriptions – they do not come free with the Chromecast), it does not have access to iTunes. You can watch or listen to all of your purchased content from Google Play, and you can watch Crackle and YouTube and at least a dozen other channels (and more added every day), but the Apple Store is off limits for now.

[Chromecast](#) currently offers sixteen channels, including Netflix, Hulu Plus, and HBO Go. You can see the [full list here](#).

Apple TV

If it *was* the iTunes goodness you were looking for, then the Apple TV set-top box is the one you'll want to consider. It rushes to the other end of the price spectrum with boxes in the \$99 range, but that's about par for the course for Apple. You know you're getting a solid piece of technology, so the price is worth it for those with this type of priority.

The setup is meant to be integrated with existing iOS devices. Plug the HDMI from the Apple TV box into your television, plug in the power, and then let your Bluetooth-enabled iPhone or iPad automatically configure the set-top box to your wireless network – so long as the iOS device is also on the wireless network. Or, if you either don't have another iOS device to play with or you just don't feel like futzing with it, you can connect the Apple TV directly to your router with an Ethernet cable. After that, it's just a matter of selecting your station and away you go.

Another big difference between the Chromecast and Apple TV is that the latter has a dedicated remote, which is what you'll use to access any of the channels listed below (list current as of April 2, 2014). However, if you want to stream any of your iTunes media from your iOS devices, you won't be able to use the device for anything else. Although, yet another nifty feature is that you can also do something called "AirPlay Mirroring", which displays your iPad, iPhone, or iPod activity on the big screen.

[Apple TV](#) currently offers access to twenty-eight channels, including Netflix, Hulu Plus, and HBO Go, but they also have other options such as a few Disney channels, Wall Street Journal, and the Weather Channel, among others. And, of course, you can access your entire iTunes library, stream podcasts, and show of your own iMovie creations. You just can't do anything else on your iOS device at the same time. [The full list is here](#).

Roku

But then comes this Roku thing everyone's talking about – and has been talking about since 2008. It was the first dedicated streaming device built for public use, and it's been through some impressive iterations throughout the years. Currently, there are four Roku models which include three increasingly robust set-top boxes and a dongle option like the Chromecast. They range in price from \$49 to \$99, on the average.

Configurations are just as easy as the other two streaming media players. The dongle, Roku 1, and Roku 2 are *wireless only*, but they will connect to any wireless band frequency you've got, plus the dongle, Roku 2, and Roku 3 are also dual-band capable, meaning a potentially more stable connection. The Roku 3 (which is the top of the line model thus far) also has an Ethernet port, which means an additional option for a rock-solid connection to the internet.

The Roku has its own remote, or you can install an app on your smartphone to control your media experience. Unlike the previous two options, Roku has Amazon Instant Video in addition to Netflix, Hulu Plus, HBO Go, et al. In fact, between the channels for movies, games, news, sports, science, and lifestyles, Roku has over 1000 channels. Yes, many of them are premium, but many of them aren't. In many ways, it's like what cable used to be – including strange little underdog-style channels no one's heard of – back before it became the Big Thing. Not every channel has unlimited content, though, so those many, many possibilities lead to ever wider opportunities.

[Roku's](#) major plus side of this is that you could literally never run out of things to watch, ever. The down side of this is trying to pick something to watch from so many options. Also understand that many of the "channels" are more like glorified video podcast collections than traditional channels, and they offer a lot of unique and interesting content. You can browse through and look at [Roku's enormous selection here](#).

The final word:

In the end, the decision on which of these media streaming devices is best for you is entirely dependent on your tastes. None of the "set-top boxes" take up anywhere near as much room as a traditional cable receiver, and the dongles don't take up any table-space at all, so space isn't the biggest concern unless everything is wall-mounted. Do you have obscure preferences that even Netflix looks at askance? You probably want a Roku. Are you just about desperate to bring your iTunes collection to life? Let's take a look at the Apple TV. Or maybe you want something simple, easy, and inexpensive with which to explore even if this whole media streaming thing is right for you – then the Chromecast is definitely the way to go.

No matter what you finally decide, our dedicated staff will be there to help guide you through the process and work out any issues you might come across, because at RadioShack, we're do-it-together kinds of folk.

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