

# Streaming Video Services

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As Christmas approaches, my mind naturally turns to cool gadgets. One technology that has invaded our home is streaming video. We now have four types of consumer electronics devices in our home that can receive video streams from services like Netflix and Hulu (a Roku player, our Wii gaming console, a connected BluRay player, and a “smart” TV). Does this create opportunity for churches and other ministries? What are the dangers?

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## What are Streaming Video Services?

There doesn't seem to be a standard term to describe the class of video service providers that include Netflix, Hulu, Roku, and uStream. These companies stream video content over the Internet, often as part of a subscription business model. The subscriber can choose to watch something and immediately can access that content wherever they are. Streaming video services can typically be watched on computers, mobile devices, and a growing array of consumer electronics devices as I described in my introductory paragraph.

Technically, services such as YouTube, Facebook, GodTube, Sermonindex, and SermonAudio could also be considered streaming video services

since they too stream video over the Internet. For purposes of my discussion here, I would exclude services like YouTube, Facebook, and God Tube because they are dominated by amateur uploads of video content rather than professionally produced content from authoritative sources.

## How can Christian Ministries Benefit from Streaming Video Services?

Obviously, many churches and ministries are already using services such as Sermonindex and SermonAudio to the glory of God. Much of the content at these sites is audio, but an increasing number of churches have advanced to video. These services provide a convenient way for church members to

hear sermons they missed due to travel or infirmity. They also enable Christians to find good teaching from around the world on topics they are exploring, or to follow a favorite pastor from afar. Brothers and sisters seeking a new church home can also get a good feel for different churches much more efficiently by listening to their sermons during the week and narrowing down the list of candidates to visit on Sundays. Because of these uses, churches find great value in these services that enable them to cost effectively broaden the impact of their ministry for the glory of God.

However, services like Netflix, Hulu, Roku, and uStream have a couple of characteristics that Sermon-index and SermonAudio generally lack. First, these secular services appeal to a broad cross-section of the global population – not just Christians. Second, they have focused on integrating their content into consumer electronics products, making it easier for families to watch video content in the more natural family room setting, gathered around the television.

On the first point, if we can find a way to meet non-believers where they are, our chances for evangelism increase significantly. Unfortunately, it's hard for Christian ministries to break into the content portfolio at Netflix and Hulu. uStream lets just about anyone create a live stream of their event. As I write this on a Saturday morning, searching for "sermon" at uStream brings up three live streams

and over 11,000 recorded streams. This is amidst a potpourri of non-Christian video sources. The uStream home page features a variety of popular streamers including LeBron James, MTV, PBS, and NASA. By participating in uStream, churches and ministries have the opportunity to encounter the lost where they are and reach them with the gospel.

uStream has also worked hard to integrate into

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the consumer electronics world. uStream is integrated into Google TV, Boxee, and Panasonic smart TVs. Consumers with these types of devices can access uStream content on their television.

Roku is a bit different from the other video streaming services. Roku is primarily a consumer electronics company. They make a small box that connects to your TV and plays streaming content over the Internet. Like cable, you subscribe to different channels (many of which are free), and then those channels are available via a remote control as you watch TV. These channels include Netflix and Hulu, but anyone can create their own channel as well. This requires programming and the ability to host the streamed content, so it's not as easy as uploading a video to YouTube or audio to SermonAudio. Today, there are a couple of dozen channels listed in Roku's "Spiritual" category, including 9 individual churches.

One of the channels on the Roku is SermonAudio, so this traditionally web-based streaming service is also moving into the consumer electronics world.

By moving into the family room and onto the

big screen TV, these streaming services can become more of a family event and can better engage the entire person with rich media.

### What are the Dangers of Streaming Video Services?

So, are there dangers for ministries using streaming services? Of course, as with any technology, there are many dangers of which we must be aware and from which we must pray for God to deliver us.

One of the biggest issues with using services like uStream and the Roku is whether, by using them, you may be leading those that you serve into temptation. The first time I pulled up uStream in preparing this article, I was greeted by an attractive young lady in a thin blouse. I quickly clicked through to the "Spirituality" category, so I don't know exactly what that was about. But, even then, the Spirituality category features "How to Connect Telepathically with Animals", "Qigong Healing - Learn to Heal Yourself", and "How to Master the Mystic Power of Tarot." It wasn't until I searched on "Christianity" that I started finding content that



was at all edifying.

Since the Roku has fewer available channels, there's less objectionable content (spiritually, there are Muslim and Hindu channels, but no psychics). Netflix, Hulu, and other mainstream Roku channels have just as much objectionable content as you'll find in your cable listings and neighborhood video store, so it's important for you to balance the opportunity to reach the lost with where you may be taking your own congregation.

I believe it's also worth thinking about whether your ministry is best served through the Internet with a "lean forward" technology that is computer-based, or a "lean back" technology that is TV-based. Undoubtedly, there's room for both as we seek to serve our Lord, but we should make sure we are appropriately applying God's gifts in the right ways for each.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, mobility, Wi-Fi, social networks, smartphones, or streaming video services, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

*Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (<http://hschooler.net>), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six homeschooled students under Russ' direction.*

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