

Your favorite TV shows are just a mouse click away

by Karla Peterson

The latest in convenience-TV gadgetry lets you watch your favorite TV shows when you want to watch them. It is flexible and (mostly) easy to use. And unlike your VCR or digital video recorder, it almost never loses the last 30 seconds of "Lost."

MOUSE POTATO - With online TV, your favorite shows are just a click away. CNS Photo Illustration by Scott Linnett.

But the best news about this liberating technology is, you probably have it already.

Lately, the media spotlight has been on YouTube's viral videos and iTunes' popular TV downloads. But while everyone was analyzing the latest video message from lonelygirl15 and snapping up episodes of "The Office" at \$1.99 a pop, the networks and some cable outlets were quietly bringing their shows to your computer.

From "Grey's Anatomy" and "Heroes" to "CSI" and "Veronica Mars," new full-length episodes of some of prime time's biggest hits can be viewed online for free and with limited commercial interruptions. You might end up looking at a screen that is smaller than a postcard, but what you are seeing is a portal to a not-too-distant TV future.

Next month, Apple will roll out Apple TV, a device that allows you to watch video content from your iTunes library - including downloaded movies and TV shows - on your TV screen. And as more companies find ways to bridge the gap between your TV and your computer, you will get more and more control over your viewing schedule.

But if you want to catch the latest episode of "Desperate Housewives" right this very minute, that opportunity is just a few mouse clicks away.

Most of the online videos can be viewed on both Macs and PCs. You will need high-speed Internet access and viewing software, such as Quicktime, Windows Media or Real Player. You can find a random assortment of old and new shows on Google, AOL, MSN and Yahoo, and a lifetime's worth of clips on YouTube. But the most complete and organized collections of full-length episodes are on the networks' Web sites.

The small screens might be the size of a Post-It, and the large screens tend to be blurry. The Web sites can be a blinding maze of options, and shows appear and disappear without warning. But if you want to have lunch at your desk with Dr. McDreamy, he is ready and waiting. Here is a guide to stalking the rest of your prime-time prey.

ABC (www.abc.com)

Offerings: Of the big broadcast networks, ABC has the most generous online collection. At the moment, you can watch all episodes from the current seasons of "Grey's Anatomy," "Lost," "Desperate Housewives," "Ugly Betty," "Men in Trees," "Brothers and Sisters," "What About Brian" and "Knights of Prosperity."

Ads: Each show is broken up into parts, and you have to watch an ad before each new chapter. You can click out of the commercial after 30 seconds, but the sponsor's logo continues to hover above the screen throughout the whole episode.

Technical difficulties: It can take you a flurry of mouse clicks to find the episode you want, and if it's an episode of the popular "Grey's Anatomy," it might freeze on you. And some of the "Lost" scenes are almost too dark for computer viewing.

Extras: Previews from upcoming episodes; highlights from "The View"; and all available episodes of "The

Nine" and "Six Degrees," which are currently off the network's prime-time schedule.

CBS (www.cbs.com/innertube)

Offerings: The network's Innertube site features multiple episodes of "CSI," "CSI: NY," "CSI: Miami," "NCIS" and "Numb3rs." You can also watch the full season of "Survivor: Cook Islands"; every "Jericho" so far; and episodes of "How I Met Your Mother," "The New Adventures of Old Christine," "The Class," "Shark," "Armed and Famous" and "The Unit."

Ads: The site only runs ads for www.cbs.com, but the same promo runs before each new segment of every show.

Technical difficulties: The most user-friendly of the network sites, Innertube is a cinch to navigate. Click on Shows, click on Full Episodes, and you're off and viewing. The full-screen option does, indeed, fill your whole computer screen. It's blurry, but it's big.

Extras: Soap-opera sneak peeks, behind-the-scenes clips, an Internet-only "Survivor" talk show, and a huge archive of Katie Couric's "CBS Evening News" broadcasts.

NBC (www.nbc.com)

Offerings: Selectively bountiful. You can indulge in the entire seasons of "Friday Night Lights" and "Heroes," along with selected full episodes of "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," "30 Rock," "My Name Is Earl," "Las Vegas," "Identity" and the "Passions" soap opera. Full episodes of "The Office" are generally available on iTunes only, although full-length "producer's cuts" have been known to pop up.

Ads: Episodes are divided into chapters, with a brief commercial running before each new segment. It can be the same commercial for days at a time.

Technical difficulties: Don't mind that cluttered NBC home page. For the most complete listing of full episodes, click on Video, then on NBC Rewind. It should be smooth sailing from there.

Extras: Two-minute catch-up clips from many prime-time shows, episodes of "NBC Nightly News," and - best of all - deleted scenes from "The Office." The deleted scenes change throughout the week, and they are so priceless, you won't mind the ads you have to watch before each one of them.

FOX (www.myspace.com/Fox)

Offerings: Current episodes of "24" and "Prison Break"; the full season of "Standoff"; assorted episodes of "American Dad," "The Loop," "Talk Show With Spike Feresten" and "Til Death." No full-length versions of "The Simpsons," "American Idol," "House" or "The O.C."

Ads: Commercials are sprinkled throughout the episodes, and you have to watch them each time you check out a new show.

Technical difficulties: Grrrrr. Fox TV has squirreled away its Fox on Demand service on the MySpace social-networking site, which is great for corporate synergy (MySpace and Fox are owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.) but not so convenient for you.

There is no information about viewing full episodes on the www.fox.com site. I fumbled my way to MySpace through the "Prison Break" home page, only to discover that I couldn't view the videos until I downloaded the Fox Full Throttle media player. Once I got the player loaded, I was good to go. Too bad I was in no mood to watch anything.

The Fox Full Throttle player promises a high-definition-like experience, but does your hi-def TV cut off the tops of people's heads? I think not. But the picture is nice and clear on both the small- and wide-screen options.

Extras: A half-hour "Prison Break" recap special and episodes of the now-canceled "Vanished," including shows that were never aired.

THE CW (www.cwtv.com)

Offerings: Full episodes of "Everybody Hates Chris," "Supernatural," "Veronica Mars," "Girlfriends," "Beauty and the Geek," "All of Us," "One Tree Hill" and "The Game."

Ads: The network will be running their full-length episodes with limited commercial interruptions.

Technical difficulties: Don't let that acid-green home page scare you. Getting the episode of your choice is a snap (Click on Full Episodes, and there they are), and watching is a joy, thanks to a great picture that remains startlingly clear, even on the expanded wide-screen option. And the sound is surprisingly robust.

Extras: Cast interviews, show highlights and the CW Lab Video Mixer, which lets you create your own videos using show clips and music.

PBS (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline)

The PBS full-length offerings are limited to the "Frontline" documentary series, but the collection is large, and each documentary comes with an information-packed home page.

There are chicken-cacciatore tutorials on the Food Network site, the first episode of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" on TVLand, and "Project Runway" updates on Bravo. But you will find the best assortment of full cable episodes on the following streaming-friendly networks:

Comedy Central (www.comedycentral.com)

Highlights from the previous evening's "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" and "The Colbert Report" fire up as soon as you hit the comedy network's home page. And since the shows are so great, watching the highlights usually means watching almost the entire show. The screen is tiny, but Stewart and Colbert are still a riot. Even when their heads are smaller than a quarter.

THE DISNEY CHANNEL (www.disneychannel.com)

The site is so busy, Mom and Dad will have to take Dramamine before they venture on board. But the target demographic will probably be happy with the selection of full-length videos, which includes a revolving selection of episodes from almost every Disney Channel series, including the popular "Hannah Montana" and

"The Suite Life of Zack and Cody."

MTV (www.mtv.com)

Tons of media snacks - behind-the-scenes clips, previews, "TRL" performances - but not much in the way of a full video meals. A recent visit found assorted full-length episodes of "The Real World Denver," "Laguna Beach," "Rob and Big," and "The Duel." The selections change regularly.

THE N (www.the-n.com)

The teen digital cable network offers full episodes of "Beyond the Break," "South of Nowhere," "Degrassi" and "Instant Star." The avalanche of extras includes behind-the-scenes clips, sneak peeks, music videos and video mash-ups.

NICKELODEON (www.turbonick.com)

On Nick's neon-bright TurboNick site, kids can watch full-length episodes of the entire Nickelodeon lineup, including "SpongeBob SquarePants," "Avatar," "Fairly OddParents," "Unfabulous" and the rather disturbing "Mr. Meaty." Extras include games, behind-the-scenes clips for Nick shows and Nickelodeon movies, and a video mash-up tool. The animated shows look blurry on the larger screens, so choose the smallest screen option available.

VH1 (www.vh1.com)

If you can make your way to the Shows menu, you will probably find full episodes of various VH1 series, including "The Best Week Ever," "Breaking Bonaduce," "Surreal Life" and "Web Junk." It's good for browsers, but not so good for viewers on a mission. Skip the fuzzy full-screen option.

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