



To stream your movies, music, and photos anywhere, all you need is a PC and good media-server software.

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Photography by Robert Cardin



TRANSFORM  
YOUR SYSTEM INTO A

**STREAMING  
MACHINE**

# IF YOU'RE A DEDICATED FAN

of music, images, and video, you've probably built an impressive multimedia empire inside your PC, with album after album of sweet jams, reams of cherished photos, and a video collection whose holdings range from smartphone gag reels to family movies to high-resolution videos ripped from your DVD collection.

Unfortunately, they're all trapped in your PC. If you want to watch one of the videos on the big HDTV in your living room, or listen to your complete music collection on a storage-strapped smartphone, what do you do?

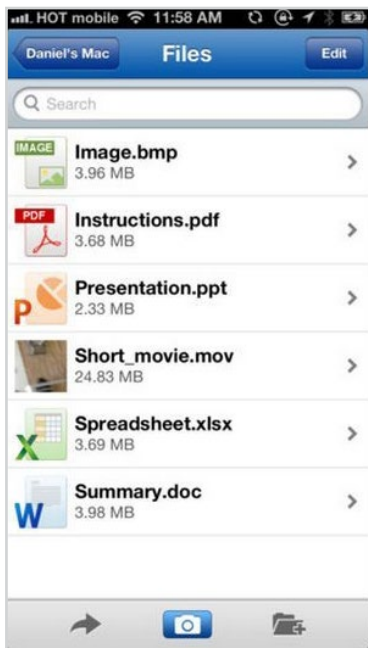
The solution is simple: Turn your PC into a media slinger—a machine that can stream your music, movies, and photos to any destination device of your choosing. It's easier than you might think, though deciding which server arrangement to

use (and how much to spend) can be somewhat tricky.

## Pick the right PC for the job

The first step is to make sure that your computer is up to the task. Server software can place a heavy load on your PC, especially when it first indexes your media library, but also when it's actively streaming. And if you want your media library to be available around the clock, you'll need to leave your PC running 24/7.

You can configure any PC to sling media over the Web, but it's best to set up a dedicated machine that can run 24/7 in a closet or basement.



To be on the safe side, use a PC that runs Windows 7 or later, packs at least 4GB of RAM, and carries a discrete video card.

**After setting up** Pogoplug on your PC, use free Android or iOS apps to access your media library from anywhere.

Indeed, many users elect to repurpose an older system as a dedicated media server: one that can sit quietly out of the way in a closet or basement until called upon to sling. If you can afford to devote a PC solely to media slinging, it doesn't have to be a screaming powerhouse of a system, because it will be free to direct all of its resources to server duty.

The software I discuss here

won't place huge demands on your PC; but to be on the safe side, you should probably use a PC that runs Windows 7 or later, packs at least 4GB of RAM, and carries a discrete video card to ensure smooth rendering when you stream movies. Optimizing Windows 8 to run on an older machine is probably the best way to go (see "How to optimize Windows 8 on old hardware," [go.pcworld.com/optwin8](http://go.pcworld.com/optwin8)), but you can also introduce a few no-cost tweaks to improve performance in Windows 7 (see "How to opti-

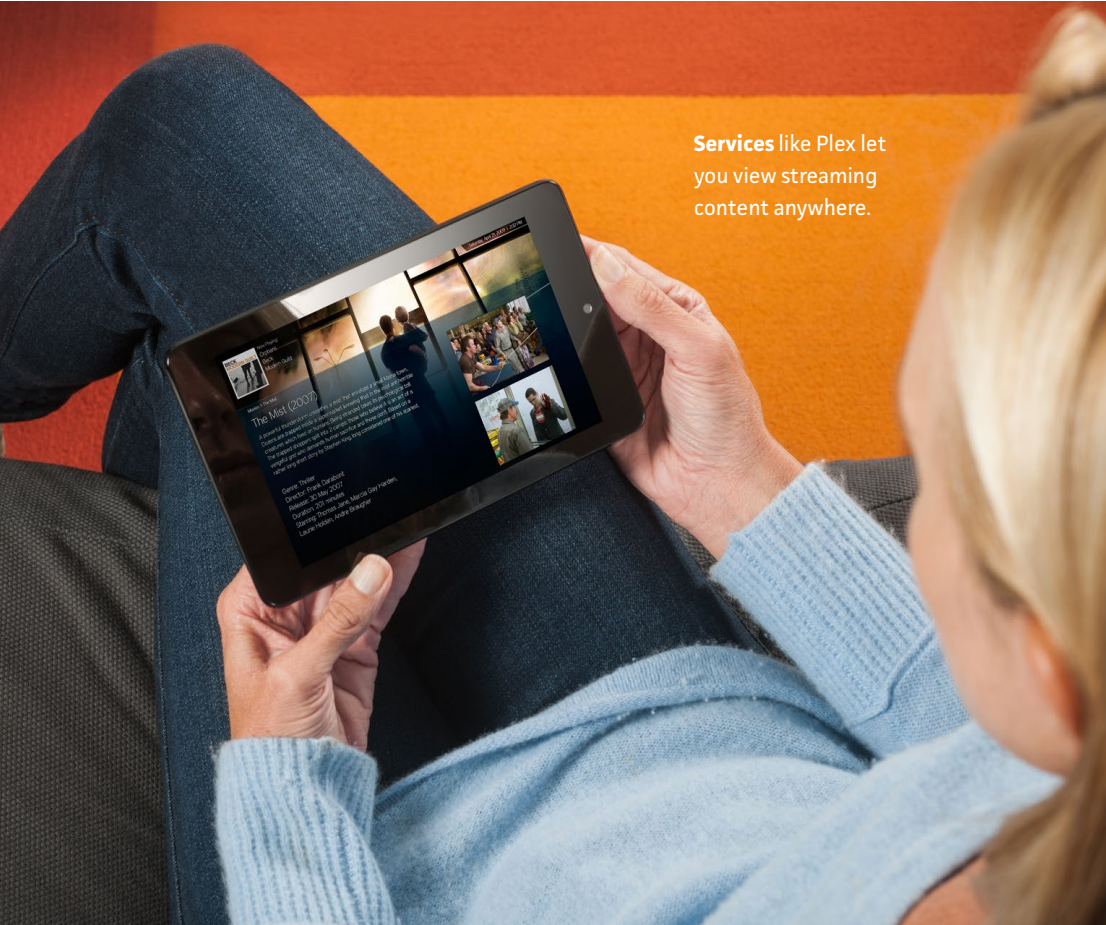
mize your Windows PC for free,” [go.pcworld.com/optwin8](http://go.pcworld.com/optwin8)).

## Choose the software that meets your needs

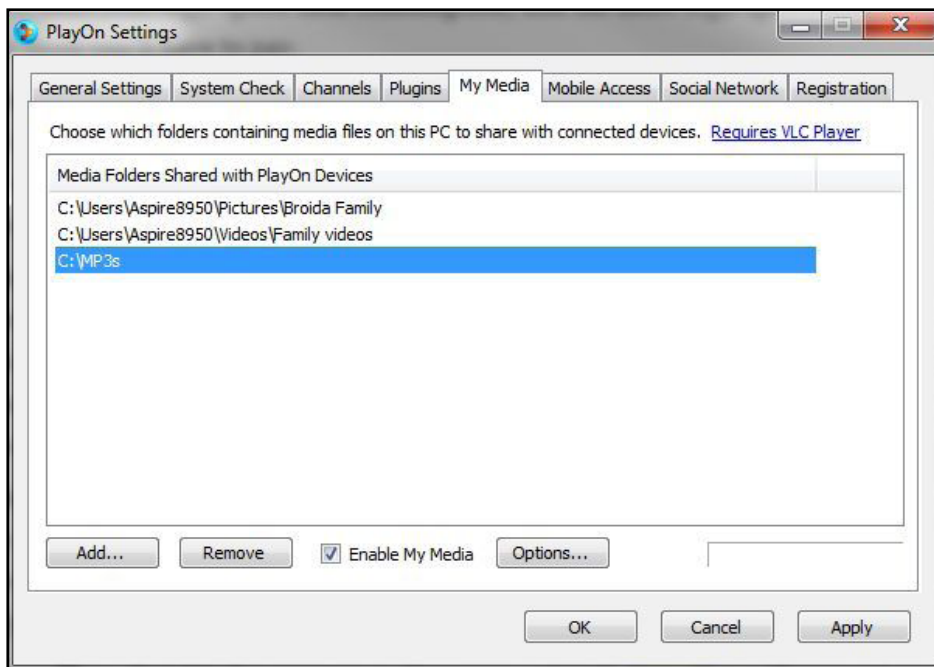
To handle the slinging, you'll need some reliable media server software. This software's capabilities will determine not only the kinds of media you can share,

but also where you can share it.

For example, Pogoplug PC ([go.pcworld.com/pogoplugpc](http://go.pcworld.com/pogoplugpc)) is a fairly straightforward Windows utility that makes your media available on your mobile devices, other PCs, and pretty much anything with a Web browser. Just choose the folders you want to share, and then sign in to your

A person with blonde hair, wearing a light blue sweater, is sitting on a dark blue couch. They are holding a black tablet computer with both hands. The tablet screen displays a movie page for 'The Mist (2007)'. The page includes a large image of the movie's cover, a smaller image of the cast, and text describing the movie. The background is a warm, orange-brown wall.

**Services** like Plex let you view streaming content anywhere.



account via one of Pogoplug’s various free companion apps ([go.pcworld.com/pogoplugextras](http://go.pcworld.com/pogoplugextras), available for Android and iOS) or any browser. From there, you can open an individual photo, watch a slideshow, stream a video, or listen to music.

You’re not limited to media,

either. The software can also “stream” files—convenient if, for example, you need mobile access to some Microsoft Office documents while you’re traveling for work. An integrated preview feature supports Word, Excel, PowerPoint, PDF, and other popular formats.

**PlayOn** makes sharing your PC’s media folders with smartphones, set-top boxes, and other devices a cinch.

Pogoplug also lets you share items with friends and family members, generating links others can use to view your content. Plus, you can download files if you're working at another PC and need to pop into your home server for some documents or music.

When you buy the full version of Pogoplug PC for \$30, you also get 5GB of cloud storage that you can use to store items in a location where you have access to them even if your PC is offline.

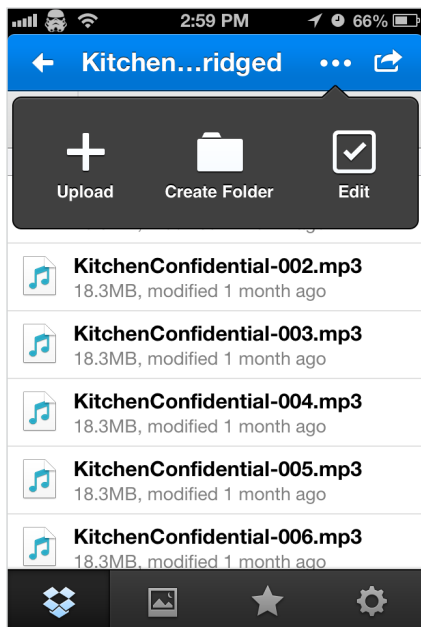
If you want to be able to stream your media to your TV, too, consider PlayOn ([www.playon.tv](http://www.playon.tv)).

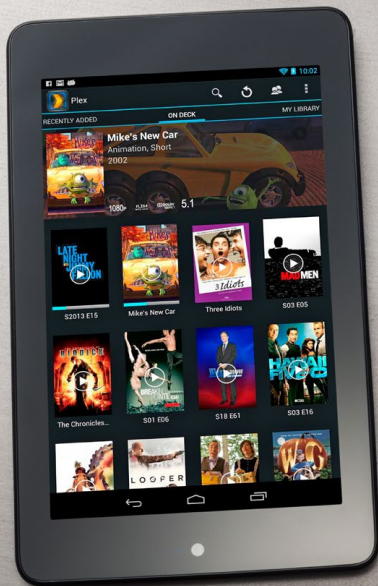
This media-streaming service turns your PC into something akin to a Roku box, giving you access to channels such as ABC, Food Network, Hulu, Netflix, and TBS. But it can also stream your personal media libraries (though not your documents, regrettably).

What's more, PlayOn works with most game consoles, smartphones, tablets, and set-top boxes (including Google TV and Roku). It also supports DLNA, a relatively new media-streaming standard designed to simplify home streaming. Plenty of new smart HDTVs, Blu-ray players, and the like support DLNA streaming, so you may already have a DLNA-certified device in your home. If you want to be able to see your media on your HDTV, PlayOn probably has you covered.

The service and software cost \$40 per year (though you can often find them on sale for less; they're currently priced at \$25 as part of a spring sale). On the other hand, if you just want to stream content from your own library and you don't care about the premium channels, PlayOn Lite lets you do that for free.

**The Dropbox app** lets you view cloud-stored files on a phone or tablet.





Plex (left) and PogoPlug work with multiple mobile devices.

Finally, there's Plex ([plexapp.com](http://plexapp.com)), a streaming media service that is more powerful than either PogoPlug PC or PlayOn, with such features as automatic downloading of metadata for each item in your library, and on-the-fly transcoding: If a particular video or music file isn't directly compatible with the device you're viewing it on, Plex will transcode it to a compatible format.

Like the aforementioned PlayOn, Plex offers a number of subscription channels, including CBS, Hulu, and NBC. It even has a browser bookmarklet that you can use to add any Web video to

your queue. You also get a unique email address for sending links to your queue, which is very handy when someone shows you an awesome video on a smartphone. Just borrow the phone, email the link to yourself, and watch it on your HDTV when you get home.

Unfortunately, Plex is a bit obtuse. Setting up and using the service can be confusing, and several of the company's support pages are incomplete. But a very active user forum offers generally strong technical support.

Plex Media Server software ([go.pcworld.com/plexmediaserver](http://go.pcworld.com/plexmediaserver)) is free for Windows and Linux, but

certain apps and features aren't. For example, if you want to stream your stuff to another PC, you'll have to install the free Plex desktop client on that PC. If you prefer to stream from a Web browser, you'll have to pay a \$4 monthly subscription to use the Plex browser client. Plex also offers decent apps for Android, iOS, and Windows Phone 7, but each of them costs \$5.

## Take advantage of your cloud storage

If you just want access to all your media from your smartphone or tablet, there's one more option to consider: cloud services.

The apps for both Dropbox ([go.pcworld.com/dropboxdown](http://go.pcworld.com/dropboxdown)) and SugarSync ([go.pcworld.com/sugarsyncdown](http://go.pcworld.com/sugarsyncdown)), for example, let you view your cloud-stored pho-

tos, documents, and videos on your phone or tablet. They include rudimentary music players, too—but if you want an even better mobile jukebox experience, try Google Music (currently available for Android only).

If you're already syncing your media to the cloud, you can probably cut your PC out of the equation and stream everything to an app. Dropbox and SugarSync offer free accounts with 2GB and 5GB of storage, respectively; but if you want more, you'll have to pay for the privilege of streaming your media from someone else's servers. It's not a bad solution, but nothing beats the convenience of setting up a media-slinging machine that can deliver your files to you anywhere in the world on almost any device you own.

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