

# LAPTOP Magazine

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# MSN TV 2

Smooth media streaming, plus Web access from the couch—for a fee.

The **MSN TV 2** is one of the most powerful and intelligent media streamers available. A bright and colorful interface, support for a wide range of Web features such as instant messaging and e-mail, and a much more logical configuration process make the MSN TV 2 a masterful media mover.

The straightforward configuration process takes less than 10 minutes. The MSN TV 2 uses Microsoft Extender technology so you can browse folders on your PC and play music and movies quickly without having to install a server program. The content streamed flawlessly over our 802.11b connection, most likely due to a well-programmed caching technology that first moves the data and then plays the video or audio back. The MSN TV 2 comes with a USB adapter for the wireless feed.

Microsoft tapped consumer electronics giant Thomson (known in the U.S. as RCA) to make the set-top box, which also includes a nice soft-touch keyboard and remote. The connection options are somewhat limited, although most users probably won't notice. There are no optical or digital ports, so you're stuck with RCA audio cables. Also, the MSN TV 2 doesn't support component connections to an

**MSN TV 2**  
[www.webtv.com](http://www.webtv.com)  
 Price: \$199  
 Rating: ★★☆☆☆  
**Wireless specification**  
 802.11g  
**Formats Supported**  
**Audio**  
 WMA, MP3  
**Pictures**  
 JPEG, GIF, BMP, PNG  
**Video**  
 Windows Media  
**Online Content**  
 MSN Video  
**Outputs**  
 RCA, Composite  
**Dimensions**  
 11.8 x 9 x 2.4 inches  
**Weight**  
 4.5 pounds

**PROS**

- Friendly interface
- Keyboard for Web surfing
- Supports dozens of Internet radio stations
- Good streaming quality

**CONS**

- Monthly fee required
- No digital audio connections

[www.liaq](http://www.liaq)

HDTV. Even though you can view high-resolution photos with the MSN TV 2, they'll be displayed in the standard TV resolution, 480i.

The MSN TV 2 makes up for these shortcomings by functioning as a robust Web client. You can access MSN instant messaging, POP e-mail, Web sites, photos you've stored in your MSN Photos folder, the MSN TV home page, and even some simple but fun puzzle games. Some Web sites that use complex programming and massive Flash animations won't load properly, but that's

The advantage is that you can use the MSN TV 2 like a computer to check e-mail and surf the Web, even if someone else is using the main PC in another room. You can stream music files at rates of up to 256 Kbps to a television and look up scores on ESPN.com. It costs \$9.99



per month to get MSN TV service through your broadband connection, or to use the device as a digital media receiver.

The keyboard helps tremendously because, unlike competing products from D-Link and Netgear, you could type up an entire document or answer e-mail from your boss just as easily as you could on a laptop.

Still, the MSN TV 2 may not meet the needs of the most demanding users. For example, the current release does not support protected content from services such as Napster or Real Rhapsody. That means if you purchase the latest U2 release online, you can play the songs back only on your PC, not on the MSN TV 2. (Microsoft has promised a firmware upgrade that will support songs downloaded using their MSN Premium service.) You do have access to more than 100 Internet radio stations, however.

Unlike Media Center PCs, the MSN TV 2 does not support any premium video content besides MSN video news and entertainment spots. Without the component connections, the MSN TV 2 will never support widescreen movie playback, either: it only supports WMA and MP3 audio files and Windows Media-encoded video.

And yet, the MSN TV 2 is an intelligent, Web-friendly device. The keyboard makes it a good stand-in computer. The simple configuration process doesn't require an engineering degree. And it streamed flawlessly over 802.11b—a major plus.

J.B.